**Syllabus for “Science Fiction and Society: Going Viral”  
Towson Seminar (TSEM) 102, Section 046, Spring 2022**

**Professor:** Joel Slotkin

**Class Meetings:** TTh 9:30-10:45, LA 2330

**Office Hours:** By appointment, via phone or video chat (email me to schedule)

**Office**: LA 5356, (410) 704-2863

**Mailbox:** LA 4210 (the English department office)

**Email**: jslotkin@towson.edu [The best way to reach me.]

**Website:** http://wp.towson.edu/jslotkin/

**TSEM 102 Catalog Description:** Designed to introduce new students to the academic expectations for college-level work, and to the intellectual, communication, and collaborative skills needed for academic success. Seminar format emphasizing active learning with variable content in different disciplines. Requires grade of C or higher to fulfill Core requirement. Not open to students with a 2010-2011 catalog or earlier. Core: Towson Seminar.

**TSEM Course Goals:**

Towson Seminars are intended to introduce you to some of the academic skills you will need in college. The following list is paraphrased and distilled from the official university learning goals and course outcomes:

* Participating in the discourse of a scholarly community.
* Engaging productively with different social and cultural backgrounds and perspectives.
* Conducting research effectively and according to the standards and rules of academic integrity.
* Developing informed and balanced interpretations based on a critical analysis of empirical evidence.
* Writing a research paper that analyzes a problem or issue and presents a compelling, substantive argument about it.

**“Science Fiction and Society” Catalog Description:** Science fiction and speculative fiction in relation to social, political, cultural, and technological issues. Topics vary but may include: environment/ecology, computers/technology, race, gender, alienness, or dystopia/apocalypse.

**Our Section Topic: “Going Viral”:**

Our section will explore science fiction dealing with the theme of “going viral.” We can think in class about different ways to define this concept, but our course readings deal with things (actual viruses, other organisms, technology, choices, ideas, etc.) that multiply rapidly, spread through a society, and transform it in a significant way. Our assigned texts for class discussion will consist of short stories, which will help us practice close reading skills in a focused way.

**Required Texts (all available as PDFs on Blackboard):**

* Bradbury, Ray. “A Sound of Thunder” (1952).
* Russ, Joana. “When it Changed” (1972).
* Sheldon, Alice [aka Raccoona Sheldon, James Tiptree, Jr.]. “The Screwfly Solution” (1977).
* Gibson, William. “Burning Chrome” (1982).
* Bear, Greg. “Blood Music” (1983 short story version).
* Brin, David. “Lungfish” (1987).
* Duchamp, L. Timmel. “The Forbidden Words of Margaret A.” (1990).
* Shawl, Nisi. “Good Boy” (2008).

**Course Requirements:**

* 00%: Plagiarism Agreement (not graded but required to pass)
* 30%: Analytical Paper Draft and Retrospective Outline (1500-2000 words)
* 40%: Analytical Paper Final (2000 words)
* 10%: Discussion Participation (weeks 1-5)
* 10%: Discussion Participation (weeks 6-10)
* 10%: Discussion Participation (weeks 11-15)

You must complete all listed assignments and maintain an adequate attendance record to pass the course. Late work will be penalized (typically a full letter grade per week).

**Core Assignments/Expectations:**

**Attendance** — Attendance is required and graded. Unexcused absences will reduce your participation grade in proportion to the percentage of class time they represent (for example, unexcused absences in 2 out of 10 classes would reduce your participation grade by 20%). That penalty may be reduced if a single unexcused absence is your only absence of any kind in the segment, and you have generally been responsible about attendance and keeping me in the loop. **On the other hand, if you accumulate eight or more unexcused absences over the course of the entire semester (i.e. more than 25% of our class time together), you will automatically fail the course.** Lateness counts as at least 1/3 of an absence, more if you are very late. Please warn me if you plan to miss class, come late, or leave early, regardless of whether the absence is excused.

**Reading** — You must allow time to read carefully and think about what you’ve read. Take notes while you read, and pay attention to how formal issues and figurative language affect the content, as well as to cultural and historical issues raised by the text. Always check Blackboard for background material, discussion questions, and/or passages you should prepare, and also come up with your own observations or questions about the reading.

**Discussion** — Please come to every class prepared to discuss the reading. Active, productive participation in discussion is required and graded. Public speaking is an important skill, and discussion often brings out ideas that you could not have formulated alone. If you have difficulty participating, you should talk to me about it in office hours. Although participation is ultimately your responsibility, I may call on people who do not talk much, and we should all try to create an atmosphere where everyone can feel comfortable sharing their ideas.

**Analytical Research Paper** — The primary written assignment will be a paper of approximately 2000 words on a topic that you choose in consultation with me. The goal of the paper will be to make an interesting analytical argument (thesis) about a significant issue raised by one of the stories we are reading. You will need to bring in additional relevant sources, which could include other works of fiction or art, scholarship about the story itself or about the cultural and scientific issues it addresses, etc. There will be one graded draft and other kinds of pre-writing that we will do in the course of the semester. I will provide more detailed instructions for this assignment.

**Exam Period Consultations —** The final exam period will be dedicated to one-on-one conferences about improving your writing. These meetings are completely optional and will not affect your grade in any way. ***However***, they will be your primary source of feedback on the final paper! The number of interested students will determine how much time I will have to talk to each of you. You will need to sign up for a time slot a week in advance.

**Office Hours** — I’m happy to discuss any questions you may have about the class. Talking to me is also the best way to find out how to improve your performance in class and on assignments. If you are having (or expect to have) any problems with the course, please do us both a huge favor and contact me as soon as possible. Please email me or talk to me before/after class to make an appointment.

**Schedule**:

*Please note:*

* Assignments are listed on the day they are due, not the day you’re supposed to start them.
* Please read the entire story before our first discussion of it.
* Please also read and prepare any discussion questions or other content on Blackboard that is relevant to that day’s class.

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| 1 | T | 2/01: | Introduction, go over syllabus, overview of course, paper assignment. |
|  | Th | 2/03: | Introduction continued. Go over plagiarism agreement. |
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| 2 | T | 2/08: | “A Sound of Thunder” (1952). [Add/drop ends] |
|  | Th | 2/10: | “When it Changed” (1972). **Plagiarism Agreement Due.** |
|  |  |  |  |
| 3 | T | 2/15: | “When it Changed” (1972) / “The Screwfly Solution” (1977). |
|  | Th | 2/17: | “The Screwfly Solution” (1977). |
|  |  |  |  |
| 4 | T | 2/22: | **Library Orientation Session in LA 3101.** |
|  | Th | 2/24: | “Burning Chrome” (1982). |
|  |  |  |  |
| 5 | T | 3/01: | “Burning Chrome” (1982) / “Blood Music” (1983). |
|  | Th | 3/03: | “Blood Music” (1983) / “Lungfish” (1987). |
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| 6 | T | 3/08: | “Lungfish” (1987) / “The Forbidden Words of Margaret A.” (1990). |
|  | Th | 3/10: | “The Forbidden Words of Margaret A.” (1990). |
|  |  |  |  |
| 7 | T | 3/15: | “Good Boy” (2008). |
|  | Th | 3/17: | “Good Boy” (2008). Prep for topic selection. |
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|  |  |  | **SPRING BREAK** |
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| 8 | T | 3/29: | **Topic Pitches (6 min each)** |
|  | Th | 3/31: | **Topic Pitches (6 min each)** |
|  |  |  |  |
| 9 | T | 4/05: | Paper Prep / Workshops. |
|  | Th | 4/07: | Paper Prep / Workshops. |
|  |  |  | [4/11 withdrawal deadline] |
| 10 | T | 4/12: | Paper Prep / Workshops. |
|  | Th | 4/14: | Paper Prep / Workshops. **End of Participation segment 2.** |
|  |  |  |  |
| 11 | T | 4/19: | Paper Prep / Workshops. |
|  | W | 4/20: | **Draft** **Due by 9pm** |
|  | Th | 4/21: | Retrospective Outline Work |
|  |  |  |  |
| 12 | T | 4/26: | **Paper Consultations (6 min each)** |
|  | Th | 4/28: | **Paper Consultations (6 min each)** |
|  |  |  |  |
| 13 | T | 5/03: | Revision Workshops. |
|  | Th | 5/05: | Revision Workshops. |
|  |  |  |  |
| 14 | T | 5/10: | Revision Workshops. |
|  | Th | 5/12: | Final checkups. **Deadline to sign up for exam period consultations.** |
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| 15 | T | 5/17: | **Papers Due.** Course Evaluations. Final business. **End of participation segment 3.** |
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| \*\* | T | 5/24: | **FINAL EXAM CONSULTATIONS**, 8-10am. |
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***NOTE:*** Verify exam times at https://www.towson.edu/registrar/calendars/exams.html

**☺ HAVE A GOOD BREAK! ☺**

**COVID-related Course Policies and Information**

Spring 2022

The University’s pandemic-related policies may evolve over time. Please consult <https://www.towson.edu/coronavirus/> to stay up-to-date. I expect you to comply with all University policies and also to use your best judgment about keeping yourself and all of us safe and healthy. In particular, the university is requiring vaccinations and boosters for all eligible students, faculty, and staff.

Although we expect a completely in-person semester, make sure you are prepared in the event that we need to take one or more class sessions online on very short notice. If this happens, we will use Blackboard Collaborate for live discussions at our usual time.

**Mask Policy:**

For the safety of all in our community, the university is requiring KN95 masks in all classroom settings. Students who do not have the proper kind of mask or are not wearing it properly will be asked to wear an appropriate mask or to fix their mask position. Any student refusing to comply with masking policies will be asked to leave the classroom immediately and will be marked absent. Appropriate masks will:

* Be KN95 or equivalent (N95, KF94) — not cloth or surgical masks.
* Cover your nose and mouth.
* Fit snugly around all edges (make sure to adjust the nose wire).
* NOT have exhalation valves/vents.

Students who have additional incidents with the mask requirement after a first warning will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct for failure to comply with this University directive. If you forget your mask, you can see if the English Department office has extras available. I will not be responsible for providing you with masks.

If you need to take a quick drink every so often while in the classroom, replace your mask promptly afterwards. If you need to eat or drink anything more substantial than that, please do so outside the classroom.

Because we will all be masked, I expect we will use name cards to facilitate discussion.

**Clearance Tool:**

Please be prepared to use the Campus Clearance Tool ([www.towson.edu/clearance](http://www.towson.edu/clearance)) on a regular basis in this course. At the beginning of each session I may request that all students show their clearance screen on their mobile device or laptop to verify that they are in compliance with campus safety protocols, including wearing a mask when required to do so. For the health and safety of others in the classroom, any students found to be out of compliance will be asked to leave the classroom (this is a good opportunity to get a test or vaccine!).

**Attendance Policy Clarification:**

If you think you may expose others to COVID by attending class, you should not attend. Such absences will be excused unless you fail to communicate with me about them in a timely fashion, or I judge that you are exploiting the policy. Please follow all University guidelines about testing and isolating when you have been exposed to COVID.

**Office Hours:**

This semester, due to the pandemic, I will be conducting office hours via phone or video chat (Blackboard Collaborate) unless there is a compelling reason to meet in person.

**General Course Policies and Expectations**

(a.k.a. the fine print)

Joel Slotkin — All Courses (last updated 8/1/2020)

*Communications:*

* Please indicate your course ***and class meeting time*** on all communications and assignments.
* Email is the best way to reach me.
* Check your Towson email and Blackboard for important messages and updates.
* In class, all cell phones and other electronic devices should be silent. Do not distract yourself or others; use politeness and common sense.
* Do not try to slip things under my office door; use my mailbox in the English Department office (LA 4210).

*Necessary Things:*

* A stapler (for all assignments submitted in hard copy).
* Reliable access to a computer, printer, internet, dictionary, Blackboard, and your towson.edu email account.
* Some safe method (or two) of backing up your data. Back up your files frequently when working, and keep copies of assignments after you turn them in. Failure to back up your work will not excuse a late paper.

*Accommodations:* Students needing accommodations should talk to me as soon as possible, so that I have time to make the appropriate arrangements. If applicable, please provide a letter from Accessibility and Disability Services authorizing your accommodation. It’s very helpful to do this even if you don’t expect to use the accommodations. Remember that ADS can help with conditions that are mental as well as physical, and temporary as well as permanent.

*Privacy and Learning Challenges:*

* When you are having problems meeting course requirements, always ***keep me in the loop*** about your status. Please do not mysteriously vanish because you are reluctant to explain the trouble you are having. This creates problems (more work for me, lower grades for you) that are completely avoidable and unnecessary.
* On the other hand, you should not feel obligated to reveal more about your personal situation than you wish.
* If you are having trouble meeting the expectations of the course for reasons that you find difficult to discuss or would prefer to keep private/confidential, please tell me a general category into which the situation falls, e.g. chronic condition, family emergency, traumatic event, challenging living situation, etc. I will then try to ask you for the minimum amount of information that I need to help you in the class and grade your work.

*Excused Absences:* University policy allows excused absences for the following reasons:

* Illness or injury when the student is unable to attend class (***Note:*** if you have a significant contagious illness such as a fever, please do not come to class!).
* Death of a family member (see the “Bereavement Procedure,” available at <http://www.towson.edu/studentaffairs/policies/>, which provides several days off and allows you to submit documentation once to a central office for all classes).
* Religious observance where the nature of the observance prevents the student from attending class.
* Participation in university activities at the request of university authorities (e.g., Intercollegiate Athletics, Forensics Team, Dance Company, etc.).
* Compelling verifiable circumstances beyond the control of the student.

*Documenting Absences:*

* Students should request and document excused absences as soon as possible (ideally at least two weeks in advance).
* Documentation should be from an appropriate source and include your name and the dates to be excused. Confidential details can be redacted.
* I will need to keep a copy; emailed images are preferred.
* If you miss class for a legitimate reason but without documentation (e.g. an illness that does not require a doctor), tell me! I will decide whether to excuse it on a case-by-case basis at the end of the semester, in the context of your total attendance record: how many classes you have missed, why you missed them, and how well you have communicated with me about absences.
* If you miss class for a reason you think is not excusable, I would still appreciate a quick heads up via email.

*Partial Absences:* Even if you will be missing a significant part of class, you should still try to attend as much of that class as possible, in order to maximize your learning (and participation grade). If you know that you will need to arrive late or leave early, please notify me in advance if possible. Try to sit near the door and enter and leave quietly.

*Late Work:*

* Under normal circumstances, I accept late work with a penalty of one full letter grade per week, prorated for fractions of weeks. To minimize the late penalty, please get me an electronic copy (via Blackboard if there is a Blackboard assignment, via email if not) as soon as the work is done. If a hard copy is required, follow up with that as soon as possible (in class or in my departmental mailbox, ***not*** under my office door). Do not wait for my permission to turn in work; that will only make it later.
* Since completing all written work is required to pass the class, you should still turn in a paper even if lateness or other factors make it likely the paper will receive an F grade.
* However, I do reserve the right not to accept work that is extremely late, especially if you have not kept in touch with me, and/or completing it is starting to conflict with other elements of the course schedule. Typically, this would make it impossible for you to pass the class.
* If you know in advance that you will have problems completing an assignment on time, I expect to hear about it in advance so we can make a plan. I do not routinely grant extensions (i.e. accept late work without a penalty), but you will have a better chance the earlier you ask and the more significant, unavoidable, and well-documented the problem is.
* If you are having trouble completing the work for reasons I might be able to help you with (either before or after the deadline), I expect you to ask me for help.
* If you do not turn in an assignment by the deadline, I expect at least a brief explanation the same day, or as soon as you are physically able to send me a short email.
* When submitting late work, please let me know if you feel there is some reason why the late penalty should be reduced or eliminated, and provide documentation if possible.
* For work that is more than a few days late, I expect regular (at least weekly) updates via email about your progress on completing it and what help you may need.

*Rescheduling Exams:* Exams and major group presentations can only be rescheduled or made up under extraordinary circumstances and with the appropriate documentation (e.g. a physician’s letter).

*Plagiarism:* Students caught plagiarizing or cheating will receive a grade of F in the course. The incident will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct, which may assess further penalties. Please read Towson’s “Student Academic Integrity Policy,” available in the Undergraduate Catalog (appendix F) or at: <http://www.towson.edu/studentaffairs/policies/>.

*Retaking the Course:* By University policy, students may retake this course only once without the express permission of the Academic Standards Committee.

*Campus-Wide Emergencies:* Some University-wide emergencies may involve significant changes in course requirements, including the timing and location of classes. For general emergency information, consult <http://www.towson.edu> or call (410) 704-2000. Sign up for text message alerts at <https://www.towson.edu/publicsafety/notification/>. Check your Towson email and Blackboard for course-specific information.

*Grading Policy:* Assignments may receive letter or percentage grades. Letter grades will be converted to a percentage in order to calculate the final grade. This final percentage grade will be converted (back) to a letter grade for posting to your transcript. The final course grade contributes to your GPA as shown (these numbers are taken from the Registrar’s website). Note that C- and D- are not available as final grades, and FX is only available as a final grade (it is used for students who stop attending class without dropping). I have also included characterizations of what an essay at each grade level should look like.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *% to ABC* | ***LetterGrade*** | *ABC*  *to %* | *GPA* | *Essay Characteristics* |
| 93-100 | **A** | 95 | 4.00 | Demonstrates originality, depth of thought, and superior clarity of structure and expression. |
| 90-92 | **A-** | 92 | 3.67 |
| 87-89 | **B+** | 88 | 3.33 | Demonstrates a thorough understanding of the text and a productive analytical response to it, as well as clarity of structure and expression. |
| 83-86 | **B** | 85 | 3.00 |
| 80-82 | **B-** | 82 | 2.67 |
| 77-79 | **C+** | 78 | 2.33 | Displays a competent understanding of the subject and a basically coherent presentation. |
| 73-76 | **C** | 75 | 2.00 |
| 70-72 | **C-** | 72 | n/a |
| 67-69 | **D+** | 68 | 1.33 | Displays only a partial grasp of the topic and/or significant problems with style/organization. |
| 63-66 | **D** | 65 | 1.00 |
| 60-62 | **D-** | 62 | n/a |
| <60 | **F** | 55 | 0.00 | Content and/or form do not fulfill some of the fundamental requirements of the assignment. |
| n/a | **FX** | n/a | 0.00 |

*Course Evaluations:* Course evaluations are your opportunity to provide feedback on how this class went, what worked, and what could be improved. They are very important to me and to the University. You will receive an email at your towson.edu address allowing you to access the online evaluation forms. There is a specific window of time during which you can submit evaluations, typically a two week period ending on the last day of classes.