

Johanna Skibsrud

## ANG 1320 Children's Literature in English

### Course Description

This course will analyse a selection of children's literature in order to better understand the genre's history and impact across genres on contemporary culture. We will begin by looking at Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* alongside diverse contemporary responses and retellings of the story: excerpts from Stephanie Bolster's poetry collection *White Stone: The Alice Poems* (1998), from Melanie Benjamin's *Alice I Have Been: A Novel* (2010) and from the Manga comics series, *Pandora Hearts* (2009). These diverse responses will highlight the wide-ranging, protean impact of children's literature, and will prompt us to consider what it is that allows certain texts to enjoy long-lasting appeal across genres. Next, we will turn to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, paying particular attention to its social and critical reception over the years. Excerpts from scholarly articles dealing with the book's problematic representations of race will be provided and discussed, alongside excerpts from Nancy Rawles' 2005 novel, *My Jim*, which provides a re-telling of the same story from the perspective of Sadie, Jim's enslaved wife. We will then turn our attentions to L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and its reinterpretation as the 1939 classic film, *The Wizard of Oz*. We will discuss both within the context of the social and political concerns of the day, the "escapist" literature and film culture that arose in the 1930s, and finally compare it to the contemporary hit musical, *Wicked* based on Gregory Maguire's 1995 novel of the same name. Our next primary text will be J. R. Tolkein's *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, which will be accompanied by excerpts of the Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf*—a major influence on Tolkein's work. This comparison will also help us to reflect on the elements of the book that have been interpreted as a parable of WWI. Also considered alongside *The Hobbit* will be the 2006 Spanish fantasy film, *Pan's Labyrinth*, directed by Guillermo del Toro. Del Toro's film treats many of the same themes of good versus evil and the politics of power and he is currently at work on a film adaptation of *The Hobbit*, due to be released in 2011. After agreeing to direct the movie version, Del Toro is reported as saying: "Rereading *The Hobbit* just recently I was quite moved by discovering, through Bilbo's eyes, the illusory nature of possession, the sins of hoarding and the banality of war – whether in the Western Front or at a Valley in Middle Earth. Lonely is the mountain indeed." Del Toro's social and political consciousness evidenced by this quotation will be examined in relation both to *The Hobbit*, *Pan's Labyrinth* and del Toro's anticipated re-interpretation of *The Hobbit*. The following questions will be posed: "Why do we tell—and re-tell—stories?" "What is introduced with each new interpretation?" "What is the role of fantasy in exploring 'adult' themes?" Our final text for the course will be Salman Rushdie's 2010 children's novel, *Luka and the Fire of Life*. We will discuss developments to storytelling models and formats due to changing technologies—an idea that Rushdie's novel explores—and end the course with the consideration of the following questions: "What are the responsibilities of literature?"; "How should literature and media for children be regulated, if at all?"; "What implications does the literature and media that children—and adults—are exposed to have—and why?"

### **Required Texts:**

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*  
Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*  
J. R. Tolkein, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*  
Salman Rushdie, *Luka and the Fire of Life*

A folder of supplementary materials will be available in class.

### **Assignments:**

<b>In-class essay and peer edit</b> (3-4 pages, class 5, due class 6 )	15%
<b>Revised essay</b> (due class 8)	20%
<b>Proposal</b> (1 page maximum; due class 10)	5%
<b>Essay</b> (5-6 pages; due class 12)	35%
<b>Creative Response Assignment</b> (due class 14)	25%