

Scottish Studies Profile: Dr William Donaldson

By William Donaldson



Course flyer for Dr Donaldson's Science Fiction and Fantasy class

During the past three semesters Dr. William Donaldson, author of Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland, and [The Jacobite Song](#), has been teaching in the Literature Department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Here he reports on his latest venture, a course on Science Fiction and Fantasy for intermediate level students.

Forgetting Ray Bradbury

could begin with the late Renaissance and trace the line of descent through Johannes Kepler, Cyrano de Bergerac and Jonathan Swift, or start, indeed, in Classical antiquity where the robot theme—a recurring preoccupation of later SF—was already in place (as we are reminded by Hephaestus’s mechanical handmaidens, or the giant Talos who guarded the Isle of Crete).

Even within the historically recent past, there has been huge diversity in style and content, ranging from “hard” SF to sword-and-sorcery fiction, presenting difficult—perhaps insuperable—questions of coherence. How does one produce a sequence of mutually illuminating texts for some of which the central posit is the triumph of the advanced physical sciences and the positivistic world view that goes with it, while others proclaim the romance and efficacy of magic?

A simple representative sample might be one way to do it, a survey of the conventional top of the pops, starting maybe with Wells’s *Time Machine*, or *Frankenstein*—that classic text of transgressive science and a freewheeling starting point for such courses. We’d need some Asimov, and Heinlein, maybe, with some Frank Herbert, perhaps; then some Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ to cover the gender angle; and probably a Sam Delany as well; William Gibson’s cyberpunk classic, *Neuromancer*, is a must have, then something recent to show the contemporary scene. But what about Philip K. Dick, author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (and much else)? Can we seriously omit Arthur C. Clarke, or J. G. Ballard, or Margaret Atwood, and what about John Wyndham? Already the field begins to look impossibly crowded. And meanwhile, oh lord, we have forgotten Ray Bradbury.

So, for the M.I.T. course I decided to slice the material a different way, adopting a central core of American texts—mindful of where we were—classics that simply couldn’t not be in, including Asimov’s *Foundation Trilogy* (the defining space opera, out of which *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* were later quarried whole); Walter M. Miller’s Cold War apocalypse *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, and James Blish’s *Black Easter* (which had the additional advantage of taking magic seriously, providing a

was made up of Scottish texts which gave us a detailed look at a specific national tradition, offering a compact body of material which might also—with luck—turn out to be coherent.

So in what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World*, David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to*

essay word count over time
courtesy of MIT student Emma
Mckinney

By this stage in the semester the kids are wandering about like ghosts, up half the night nursing ailing experiments, and Connie Willis's light but beautifully executed Nebula and Hugo-winning *oomsday Book* with its time-travelling Oxford historians seems a good place to stop.

Next time, we've got to have more Fantasy. Some *Gormenghast* maybe? Or Michael Ayrton's forgotten masterpiece *Tittivulus*? And some SF poetry. And some short stories—perhaps "Flowers for Algernon" and "Build up Logically"—to vary the genres a bit. And we can't go twice without some Vonnegut. And, oh lord, where are we going to put Ray Bradbury?

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