

# Women's Literature: Worlds of Fantasy and Science Fiction

Coursebook



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# Introduction

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How do stories about unknown new worlds lead to discovering your own world?

This course in Women's Literature is focused on works of science fiction and fantasy written by women. We will look at the freedom these genres offer for women writers, discover the values and ideas that inform the stories, and explore themes of identity, gender, race, and social justice.

In this one-semester course, you will read three books, one novella, and several short stories. The first unit uses the works of Diana Wynne Jones to explore the fantasy genre. The second unit looks at science fiction through the work of Ursula Le Guin. The course will culminate with reading a contemporary novella, and completing a project that gives you the opportunity to envision and write, or illustrate, a science fiction or fantasy story of your own.

One focus of this course is *world building*, the writer's craft of creating an elaborate, believable story world. How does the author create a viable world for her characters? Why does she create the world this way? What issues or themes are being raised? Are these themes or issues particularly meaningful to women or are they more universal? Is there a feminine sensibility in the writing, and if so, how is it noticeable?

As you read, you will be keeping a reader's journal in order to address and continue to reflect on these questions. You will turn in your reader's journal at the end of the first two units.

In addition to assignments, you will find **Along the Way** sections that draw your attention to specific story elements. You need not answer any questions you find there, but feel free to jot down your ideas, questions, and musings in your reader's journal.

## Course Materials

This coursebook contains all the instructions and assignments you need to complete the course. In addition to this coursebook, the following books are included with this course:

*Dogsbody* by Diana Wynne Jones

*Fire and Hemlock* by Diana Wynne Jones

*The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula Le Guin

*The Unreal and the Real: Selected Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin*

*Binti* by Nnedi Okorafor

Blank reader's journal

## Academic Expectations

You are expected to meet your work with integrity and engagement. Your work should be original and give an authentic sense of your thoughts and opinions, rather than what you think the teacher reviewing your work wants to hear. When you conduct your research, you are required to cite your sources accurately. Plagiarism, whether accidental or intentional, is a serious matter. These guidelines apply whether you are enrolled in Oak Meadow School and submitting your work to your Oak Meadow teacher, or you are doing this course independently and having your work assessed by a parent, tutor, or school district representative.

Be sure to read all assignments carefully. Often a student misses a part of the assignment, or glances too quickly at it and misunderstands it, so take your time and make sure you know just what is expected for each assignment. By taking the time to review all the assignments before beginning the lesson's reading, you can read with purpose and take relevant notes.

All of your work should show a level of polish. Perhaps the most important part of the writing process is proofreading. This should be a key step in your working process. After you have finished your assignments, take the time to proofread for spelling errors and grammar mistakes. Proofreading your work before submitting it helps ensure that you are turning in work that is an accurate representation of your knowledge.

Keeping these tips in mind will help you get the most out of this exploration of women's literature.



# UNIT I: Fantasy

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(Image credit: Max Pixel)

In this unit, we focus on the fantasy works of Diana Wynne Jones. You will read the following books.

- *Dogsboddy* tells the story of a star who is sentenced to living life on Earth in the body of a dog while retaining some of his star memories and unique abilities. His quest to redeem himself is hampered—and in some ways, enhanced—by his mundane body and interactions with humans.
- *Fire and Hemlock* is a mysterious fantasy that centers around those who are caught up in a powerful world of magic that seems to be coming from their own imaginations. The veil between the magical and ordinary worlds is masterfully woven in this complex tale.

Both of these stories feature female heroes, a driving force behind Jones's work, as she explains in her essay "A Heroic Ideal—A Personal Odyssey" (found at the end of *Fire and Hemlock*):

“But a desire was growing in me to have a real female hero, one with whom all girls could identify and through that, all persons—a sort of Everywoman, if you like . . . I knew that what I wanted to do really was to write a book in which modern life and heroic mythical events approached one another so closely that they were nearly impossible to separate . . .”

In her writing, Jones borrowed inspiration and thematic elements from many classic tales she read as a child. For instance, *Fire and Hemlock* finds origins in the ancient Scottish ballad, “Tam Lin,” a supernatural or fairy ballad, and in a related ballad, “Thomas the Rhymer.” Each chapter is headed by an excerpt from one of those ballads. (You might like to read these ballads; you can find them in the library or online.) The novel was also influenced by Edmund Spenser’s poem “The Faerie Queene” as well as T. S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets.” Jones was profoundly influenced by books she read during her life, and this is mirrored in the story by the many books that influence Polly’s life.

## Lesson

# 1

# Introductory Essay

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## Learning Objectives

- Reflect on your experience and interests.
- Demonstrate clear, organized writing.

## Assignments

### Writing

Write a one- to two-page essay about your experience and interest in fantasy and science fiction writing. Use the following questions to shape your essay.

- Fantasy books usually include magical creatures or elements and science fiction books usually use scientific concepts to create futuristic worlds or otherworldly planets. What fantasy or science fiction works have you read? Have you read fantasy or science fiction books written by women? List some of the writers and books you have enjoyed.
- What draws you to these genres?
- Are there any common themes that you have noticed in science fiction, fantasy, or any other type of speculative fiction (stories with supernatural or futuristic elements)?
- What do you hope to get out of this course?

Use your best writing skills to shape your essay, polishing your rough draft to make sure your ideas are fully expressed, and your writing is clear and organized.

### SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed your essay, please share it with your Oak Meadow teacher.

### ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Write a personal essay about your experience with science fiction and fantasy.



## Lesson

# 2

# Dogsbody: Life on Earth

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Have you ever looked at the stars and wondered what it would be like to live among them? Imagine if you could touch a star or talk to one. This story offers an imaginative glimpse of a star's life among a society of stars. It imbues stars with language, relationships, laws, and feelings. As you enter into this new story world, look for parallels with our own world of today. For instance, how do positions of power affect the relationships between people? What happens when someone loses a position of power, or gains one? How does this change how they are treated by others?

## Learning Objectives

- Analyze character development.
- Support ideas with textual evidence.

## Assignments

### Reading

This week, read chapters 1–13. Look over the assignments below before you begin reading.

Keep your reader's journal next to you as you read so you can keep notes about celestial influence, human/animal relationships, and vocabulary words.

### Reader's Journal

Begin your reader's journal by noting the book's title and name of the author. Keep this journal handy so you can note observations and record significant quotations and page numbers as you read.

Here are your reader's journal assignments, which you will work on for the next two weeks as you read the book.

### ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read chapters 1–13 in *Dogsbody*.
- Complete reader's journal assignments.
- Identify favorite passages.
- Give examples of the main character's limitations.
- Describe the character's inner perspective.
- Identify story challenges to overcome.
- Write a first-person narrative about an animal rescue.

1. There are many episodes where celestial beings influence Sirius's life on Earth. In your reader's journal, keep track of the episodes where celestial beings appear in the midst of ordinary life to either help or hinder the unfolding events.
2. Since the human/pet relationship is a theme throughout the story, create a list of scenes where humans treat animals with either kindness or cruelty. Don't describe the whole scene; just describe the interaction between the animal and human. Make sure to include any names the animals are called (you will find an assignment related to names in a later lesson). You may want to create two columns (kind/cruel) to keep track. You may find you also want to include a third in-between column to show when something intended as a kindness is cruel and vice versa.
3. Keep a list of words that are new to you, or that you find particularly captivating, such as *effulgence*, *fulminating*, and *ineffably*. If you don't know the meaning of a word, look it up and jot down the definition. You can do this after your reading session so you don't interrupt the flow of the story, or you can stop reading to find out the definition so you can get more out of the story—do whatever works best for you. While you list and define the new words you discover, note how their descriptive quality adds to the story.

You will turn in your reader's journal at the end of this unit.

## Writing

1. As you are reading, find and copy at least four favorite passages or phrases. Write a few sentences about why you like each one or find it meaningful. Make sure to note the page number where each passage can be found.
2. What are the limits of the main character's experience on Earth? Why are these limits imposed on him? How does Sirius experience them in everyday life? Use specific examples and direct quotations from the text (remember to include page numbers!) in your response.
3. What is Sirius's larger inner perspective? How and when does it begin to emerge? Give specific examples from the text.
4. How and why does Sirius begin to overcome his doggy limitations? What are the challenges or obstacles he faces in trying to assert his true nature over his dog nature? Give specific examples.
5. Have you ever rescued an animal, either a wild one or a pet? If not, do you know of anyone who has? Write at least one or two paragraphs, using a first-person narrative to describe the events surrounding the animal being rescued. (You can write a fictional narrative if you don't have any personal experience in this area. If you do, please note that it is a work of fiction.)

## SHARE YOUR WORK

Submit your work to your Oak Meadow teacher.

## Lesson

# 6

# *Fire and Hemlock:* A World of Monsters

## Learning Objectives

- Interpret significance and predict story events.
- Demonstrate revision, editing, and proofreading skills.

## ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read Part Two and Part Three in *Fire and Hemlock*.
- Complete reader's journal assignments.
- Give your interpretation of story events.
- Write a one-page essay.

## Along the Way

Mr. Lynn's definition of fairy stories is that "Each one has a true, strange fact hidden in it, you know, which you can find if you look" (178). Think of a fairy tale you are familiar with (or read one) and see if you can find a "true, strange fact hidden in it."

## Assignments

### Reading

Read the following this week:

- Part Two: Now Here
- Part Three: Where Now?

### Reader's Journal

Continue to work on your three reader's journal assignments.

1. Keep track of unusual events that take place in the midst of Polly's ordinary life.
2. Describe instances where Polly acts heroically.
3. Construct a time line for story events.

## Writing

1. In your own words, describe Polly's discoveries when she sneaks into the empty Hunsdon House and give your interpretation of what you think is going on. Use specific passages from the story to support your interpretation.
2. In a one-page essay, explain how Polly's two lives (her ordinary life and her hero life) and two homes (with her mother and with Granny) weave together. What elements overlap between her different lives? What ways do the different lives mirror each other? In the circumstances of your own life, does it sometimes feel that you are leading more than one life? How? Does this relate to Polly's experience in some way?

Write two or three paragraphs, carefully organizing your ideas into a cohesive essay. Use topic sentences, supporting details, specific text references, and your own original ideas to express your thoughts. Write a rough draft and then revise your essay using the following checklist to improve the clarity and effectiveness of your writing.

- Is my information well organized? Are the main ideas and supporting details in a logical sequence?
- Is there a beginning, middle, and end to each paragraph and to the piece as a whole?
- Are my sentences phrased carefully? Do I vary the sentence structure?
- Have I stayed on topic? Have I omitted needless words and phrases?
- Have I checked the final draft for spelling mistakes and errors in punctuation and grammar?

### SHARE YOUR WORK

Share your work from lessons 5 and 6 with your Oak Meadow teacher.

## Lesson

# 14

# *The Unreal and the Real: Short Stories*

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## Learning Objectives

- Analyze plausibility of story elements.
- Compare the male-female interactions in fiction and real life.

## Assignments

### Reading

Read the following short stories in *The Unreal and the Real*:

- “The Fliers of Gy”
- “The Shobies’ Story”

### Writing

After reading both stories, answer the following questions for the story you liked best.

1. What do you find most implausible or hard to understand in this story?
2. What do you find most plausible or likely to occur in the future?
3. Find one passage that relates to your life or resonates with you. Write down the passage and then explain its relevance for you. (Make sure to note the page number.)
4. What is the view of women (the female perspective) in this story? How do women relate to the men in the story? How is this similar to or different from your experience of how males and females relate?
5. Summarize the story’s premise in a few sentences.

## ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read “The Fliers of Gy” and “The Shobies’ Story” in *The Unreal and the Real*.
- Identify the story element that seems implausible.
- Identify the story element that seems most plausible.
- Identify a meaningful passage and explain its relevance for you.
- Analyze the female perspective in the story.
- Summarize the story’s premise.

**SHARE YOUR WORK**

When you have completed this lesson, please share your work for lessons 13 and 14 as well as your reader's journal.

You have now completed Unit II.



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