**Literature and Environment: Contemporary Pastoral Seminar**

**Prof. Sebastian Knowles**

**Thursday 12-2 p.m. (KIEKK16)**

**Spring 2020**

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There Will Come Soft Rains

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,  
And swallows calling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,  
And wild plum-trees in tremulous white;

Robins will wear their feathery fire  
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one  
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree  
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,

Would scarcely know that we were gone.

(Sara Teasdale, 1918)

**Introduction**

Week 1 (January 16) Introduction: The World Without Us

Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (excerpt)\*

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**Part I – The Journey**

Week 2 (January 23) *Watership Down*, Chapters 1-8

Week 3 (January 30) *Watership Down*, Chapters 9-17

Week 4 (February 6) Octavia Butler, “Bloodchild”\*

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**Part II – On Watership Down**

Week 5 (February 13) *Watership Down*, Chapters 18-23

Week 6 (February 20) *Watership Down*, Chapters 24-29

Week 7 (March 5) “Green Plants as Intelligent Organisms”\*; “A Web of Trees and Their ‘Hidden’ Lives”\*; Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (excerpt)\*

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**Part III – Efrafa**

Week 8 (March 12) *Watership Down*, Chapters 30-33

Week 9 (March 19) *Watership Down*, Chapters 34-38

Week 10 (March 26) Karen Russell, “The Bad Graft,”\* “The Gondoliers”\*

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**Part IV – Hazel-Rah**

Week 11 (April 2) *Watership Down*, Chapters 39-45

Week 12 (April 16)  *Watership Down*, Chapters 46-50, Epilogue

Week 13 (April 23) Conclusion: The Hiding Place

Max Porter, “Dead Papa Toothwort”\*, Robert MacFarlane, “The Hiding Place”\*

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All texts marked with an asterisk\* will be available for download, either on Moodle or at the following site: <https://www.sebastianknowles.com/contemporary-pastoral>

Please note that the syllabus is subject to change.

**Course Description**

The pastoral tradition is not dead: it just went underground. We will follow it into the rabbit warrens of Richard Adams’s *Watership Down*, and into the nightmare visions of contemporary environmental writing, where plants prey on humans and seawalls fail to protect the land. The work of feminist science fiction writers (Karen Russell’s “Bad Graft,” Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild”) presents a new kind of pastoral writing, in which nature controls man rather than the other way around. Works such as Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* and Max Porter’s *Lanny* reflect a fundamental change in the way that fiction presents the natural world. The trees are alive, and they fight back. Research on plant neurobiology suggests that this is not entirely fiction. As Nature becomes more menacing in the age of the Anthropocene, writers have taught us to fear the effects and the assumptions of human dominance over what we casually and inaccurately call “our” environment.

The lessons for the world are obvious: it is not for nothing that Richard Adams begins *Watership Down* with a quote from Cassandra foreseeing doom and despair:

CHORUS: Why do you cry out thus, unless at some vision of horror?

CASSANDRA: The house reeks of death and dripping blood. (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*)

Fiver, the prophet in *Watership Down*, will be our guide; the extraordinary mythical world of El-ahrairah, the trickster rabbit God, will provide us a way of reading our current landscape.

**Learning Outcomes**

We will read the entirety of *Watership Down*, and several short stories and essays by contemporary English and American writers, examining the new place of nature in a fundamentally changed world. The texts are chosen to introduce the student to a wide range of new and experimental writing, and to reflect on the cultural and political implications of a changing environment. A final essay of 2,500-3,500 words will engage with the ideas of the course, either in a new text of your choosing or through an analysis of the works studied in class. Students will be evaluated on three things: 1) class participation throughout the course, 2) a short analysis of a single chapter of *Watership Down*, and 3) the final essay project.

**Texts**

Students are expected to purchase their own copy of *Watership Down* by Richard Adams. All other texts will be made available on Moodle, or through the following website: <https://www.sebastianknowles.com/contemporary-pastoral>

**Attendance and Participation**

A seminar is a place to share ideas, where everyone has the opportunity to listen and to lead. Input from all participants is essential: regular attendance and active participation is therefore expected. If you have to miss a session, I will expect you to notify me beforehand.

**Course Requirements**

1) Attendance and Participation

* Regular attendance is expected; students may not miss more than two sessions. Students will be assessed on their active contributions to classroom discussion.

2) Chapter Analysis

* Each chapter of *Watership Down* begins with an epigraph, which provides a literary clue to its interpretation. For each day that we study *Watership Down*, a student will be assigned to present their research on the implications of a chapter’s epigraph for the chapter it introduces and for the book as a whole. This research should then be written up (250-500 words) and submitted electronically to me by the time of the following class meeting.

3) Final Essay

* All students will have to write a final essay (2,500-3,500 words) engaging with the ideas of the course, either in discussion of a new text of your own choosing, or through analysis of one or more of the works discussed in class. If you choose to discuss a new text (such as Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*, or Greta Thunberg’s *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference*), be sure to discuss your plans for the essay with me. I will read and comment on drafts up to the May 1 break. Send your essay electronically (PDF form) to me by noon on **Thursday May 7, 2020.**

**Contact**

To make an appointment, please contact me before or after class, or through e-mail at [Knowles.1@osu.edu](mailto:Knowles.1@osu.edu). Appointments will be scheduled in the office of Prof. Johnny Riquet, office B 4056.