



TEXAS A&M ENGLISH  
DEPARTMENT

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# THE ENGLISH AGGIE

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HAPPY SPRING!



Interview with Dr. Robinson | Pre-Registration | Student Short Story

# Journey Into the Myth: Dr. Elizabeth Robinson Introduces an Exciting New Class on Tolkien



Dr. Elizabeth Robinson has worked in the Texas A&M Department of English for over 30 years. She is currently an instructional professor and regularly teaches children's literature, young adult literature, fantasy literature, and fairy tales in the English tradition. Next fall, she will teach the very first

section of ENGL 434, Advanced Studies in Science Fiction and Fantasy. Her course, titled "The Ages of Middle-earth: J.R.R. Tolkien's Great Myth," will focus on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and approach them specifically through the lens of myth.

Dr. Robinson's Tolkien course will read the entirety of the Legendarium: *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as several critical selections. Dr. Robinson says that her course will "analyze the seminal tales of Tolkien's Middle-earth, his 'English' myth. It [will] explore topics including the nature of heroes/heroism, good and evil, the created races (Elves, Dwarfs, Men etc.), the supernatural and the ways in which the Christian myth 'is absorbed' in the larger myth, significant themes, and the roles of women. The course [will] draw upon relevant scholarship, and [will be] informed by consistent reference to Tolkien's letters, his essay, "On Fairy-Stories," and his poem, "Mythopoeia." There are only 35 seats available in the course, and the relatively small class size will allow for fun, engaging discussions.

Dr. Robinson expects to have students who are extremely well-versed in Tolkien lore, which will make for an exciting semester full of learning from and with her students. While Dr. Robinson is extremely knowledgeable on Tolkien and suspects many students will already have extensive knowledge, if you are unfamiliar with Tolkien, don't be discouraged! If you have never heard of "the Legendarium" or "hobbits" or have never read anything by Tolkien, you can still succeed in the course. If you are only familiar with the film adaptations, this course could be a great opportunity to familiarize yourself with Tolkien's novels. As long as students are willing to spend a significant amount of time reading, Dr. Robinson would "love to see some students who will be meeting Tolkien for the first time." When she created the class, she envisioned "a place where students

who would like to get to know Tolkien would feel comfortable coming and take the challenge to read this body of work." Consider journeying into the great myth this fall!

**"I really would like [the class] to be a place where students who would like to get to know Tolkien would feel comfortable coming and taking the challenge to read this body of work."**

Dr. Robinson finds it nearly impossible to choose just one favorite book by Tolkien, but she was able to share a few of her favorite moments throughout the series. The moment that she remembers best from her very first time reading *The Lord of the Rings* is when the ents—Middle-earth's humanoid trees—go to battle. That scene, more than any other, has remained with her through the years.

One of her other favorite moments occurs periodically throughout the last two novels. "Samwise and Frodo have a running conversation about whether or not songs will be sung about them, whether or not tales will be told about them," Dr. Robinson explained. "The sense of will anyone

***"Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out loud of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: 'Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring' and they'll say 'Oh yes, that's one of my favorite stories.'"***

***Samwise Gamgee, The Two Towers***

know what we did and remember? Will we be heroes?" She believes that this conversation does not come from a place of pride, but rather that it represents their "desire for immortality," to be immortalized and appreciated in song and story. Frodo and Samwise are asking themselves "will the things that we have suffered and the things that we have done and the hobbits we have become, will that matter?" This recurring theme of remembrance and immortalization through language was a very special part of the series to her.

There are many things that Dr. Robinson looks forward to about her Tolkien course. She looks forward to meeting her students, for them to read the ents going to battle, Frodo and Samwise's recurring conversation, and all her other favorite moments, and teaching her students to pronounce Tolkien's name correctly. The thing she is *most* looking forward to, however, is being part of a communal appreciation for Tolkien: "There is such a community of fellowship around Tolkien. I really think that is what I'm most excited about: experiencing Tolkien with a group of people—finding the excitement and sharing Tolkien."

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Dr. Robinson and her incredible classes have developed a reputation for drawing students towards the field of English, and her Tolkien course will likely do much of the same thing. She says creating engaging and enjoyable courses "took years of going to Center for Teaching Excellence workshops, learning from people who were just extraordinary educators, and years of developing things to do what I wanted to see happen in my classes." Even now, she is continually re-evaluating and re-working her classes based on student evaluations and her own observations. She has "spent a lot of years doing a lot of learning and a lot of listening to students to try to make courses function in a way that students not only learn but have a good time."

**"Students come into my world, and let me into theirs and it's really a lovely thing. Part of what makes you all an amazing group of people is that you're willing to come into a class, you're willing to invest yourself in that class, in that experience, in those people, and in me as an instructor."**

Dr. Robinson is known not only for her wonderful classes but also for her dedication to her students. She explained that "a number of years ago, I realized that this was not just a job, that I am not here just to go in and teach. I realized that my students are so much more than [a job.]" Still, Dr. Robinson credits a lot of her success to her students and their willingness to invest themselves in their education: "Students come into my world, and let me into theirs and it's really a lovely thing. It's part of what makes you an amazing group of people is that you're willing to come into a class, you're willing to invest yourself in that class, in that experience, in those people, and in me as an instructor."

The Science Fiction and Fantasy minor is one of several new minors that will be officially offered beginning in the fall of 2022. Students who are interested in adding this minor to their degree plan should meet with their advisor. Several courses that fit into the minor are already offered, including the science fiction course, fantasy literature course, certain single author courses, and sections of young adult or children's literature that have a significant focus on fantasy, such as Dr. Robinson's sections. Now that the minor will be officially available in the fall, students can expect more courses to become available, including a course on horror! ENGL 434 will be the first 400-level capstone course for the Science Fiction and Fantasy minor. There has been a great deal of student interest in this minor, and Dr. Robinson and the English department are very excited for it to begin.

If you are not able to secure a seat in any of Dr. Robinson's classes next fall (and even if you are!), consider joining the Aggie Kolbitar Society. J.R.R. Tolkien was a founding member of the original Kolbitar Society, and the Aggie Kolbitars continue to discuss myth, literature, history and all topics within the liberal arts. Tolkien mythology fits within the Kolbitars' discussions, and Dr. Robinson would love to see a presentation on his work!

# Prepare for Registration Special Topics in English

## **ENGL 481: Senior Seminar (Law and Literature)** **Dr. Michael Collins (Section 902)**

Crime, detection, trial, punishment, rehabilitation, freedom: This is the familiar cycle of justice in the United States and many other nations. The whole of this cycle, as well as the legal and theoretical framework in which the cycle unfolds, is the subject matter of the interdisciplinary subfield of literary criticism and legal studies that is known as “Law and Literature.” As a way of introducing “Law and Literature,” and its subfield, “Law as Literature,” this class will explore works that represent, theorize, or condemn all or part of this cycle as the authors explore the intricacies of injustice and its opposite.

## **ENGL 481: Senior Seminar (Cyberpunk: Fact and Fiction)** **Dr. Andrew Pilsch (Section 904)**

In 1984, William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer* changed the nature of the future. While science fiction had grappled with a future in outer space, Gibson turned inward, to cyberspace, the computer, and life online. In 1984, Apple Computer launched the first Macintosh computers with a slick, Orwell-referencing ad which implied personal computers were a tool for the liberation of the mind. This course looks at these and other, similar events as a related cultural moment in which the personal computer first emerged on the pages of science fiction and in homes across the world. We will examine this turn under the banner of “cyberpunk,” the term applied to Gibson and his companions who first wrote science fiction about computers, and will explore the idea of the personal computer in science fiction, memoir, electronic dance music, and film.

## **ENGL 481: Senior Seminar (Consumerism and American Culture)** **Dr. Sally Robinson (Section 903)**

From at least the middle of the 19th century, American culture has been attempting to come to terms with the ever increasing dominance of consumerism in all aspects of life. Literature, film, and a wide range of non-fiction writing has represented, criticized, made fun of, and celebrated the forms and practices of consumer culture. Whether the topic is profligate shopping, reality television, advertising, food trends, commercialized religion, or the “Disneyfication” of literature and history, representations of consumerism always raise questions about cultural value. In this class, we will read fiction and nonfiction and view films that actively engage in questions about the meanings of consumerism. Some attack consumerism as “fake;” some celebrate it as empowering; some rely on gender and class stereotypes to categorize “high” versus “low” culture; some imagine consumer culture as a vast conspiracy aiming to control individuals; and some worry about what kind of people consumer culture makes us. Throughout the course, we will challenge commonsense ideas about the meanings of consumerism, with the goal of arriving at a more complex picture of how culture and commerce, art and commodities, interact with and influence each other; and how writers and filmmakers have created narratives to respond to the threats and promises of consumer culture.

## **ENGL 304: Topics in Digital Research** **Dr. Jason Crider**

With nearly two-thirds of internet traffic occurring via mobile devices today, digital media is increasingly being consumed and created away from the stationary desktop and out “on the move.” Rapid advancements in smartphone, GPS, and augmented reality technologies means that digital information now interacts more and more with non-digital, analog spaces. This course takes digital media’s mobile turn as both its topic of study and its genre of writing.

So what does that mean? In this course, students will research the histories and theories behind this digital shift and create multimedia writing projects designed to change the way their audiences engage with space. Readings will range from science fiction to critical theory to contemporary critique. Projects will center around free, open-source digital software as students learn to write for emerging digital platforms. No prior technological experience required.

## **ENGL 391: Folklore Literature and World Cultures** **Dr. Jennifer Wollock**

Folklore is a primary building block of all literatures and all cultures around the world, something that all families and countries share. This new course gives students a chance to explore a variety of folk arts, carried by the oral tradition across national boundaries, that bind communities together to shape human identity. We will look at folktales, folk song, sayings, customs, folk drama (with human and puppet actors) and dance, arts, crafts and celebrations. We will also delve into the history of the field, which connects literature, anthropology, and philosophy, from the time of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) down to the present. For more information, please contact the instructor by email: [j-goodman@tamu.edu](mailto:j-goodman@tamu.edu).

## **ENGL 415: Studies in a Major Author (Ursula K. Le Guin)** **Dr. Apostolos Vasilakis**

This course will focus on the work of the speculative fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin. During the course we will follow Le Guin’s progression and evolution as a writer, examine some of her most important novels, short stories, and essays and see how her narratives constantly address questions of time, change, identity, and technology. Students will be exposed to Le Guin’s work and her engagement with utopian thinking, and gain some understanding of the author’s narrative strategies and techniques.

Proposed readings include *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Lathe of Heaven*, and *Dancing at the Edge of the World*.

To see additional course descriptions, visit [our website](#) or check for syllabi from previous semesters in Howdy.

# The Life Span of the Common Barn Owl

Alyssa Smith '23

My father used to tell us stories about when he was growing up. Sometimes the stories were so bizarre I simply couldn't believe them, at least not to his face. But secretly, the fact was those stories were so bizarre sometimes that I can't imagine my father, let alone anyone, was able to make them up with just the brain in their heads, so I believed, for the most part. He would always put in these hidden meanings for us to pick up on as well. Like "Milk makes your bones stronger" or "If you don't eat your vegetables bad things will happen". Usually light-hearted, easy to pick up on, meanings just below the surface. Usually.

One story in particular that my father told me has been cemented into my head, causing me to think and think and think about it every single day, every day since I've heard it. It was my birthday, technically, being just after midnight, and I had walked into the kitchen after getting a phone call from one of my best friends singing "Happy Birthday" very poorly. With only the moonlight streaming through the blind-less windows to guide me to cure my thirst, I saw my father sitting at the kitchen table, back turned to me, stifling his sobs unsuccessfully while staring out of the glass-paned window and the tree that stood just a few feet from it.

There is something about seeing your father cry for the first time that is absolutely and utterly terrifying for a daughter. And I don't mean one or two tears, but a sob not even a masculine front can hide. And even more heartbreaking, when that cry is being stifled and not being let out to its fullest extent. That pain being a living breathing thing, put into an airtight box, with only a tiny poked hole in the top to breathe. That tiny poked hole gives it what it needs, but so little of it that it turns unbearable.

The realization that I was not alone in the kitchen that night stalled my feet halfway to the cupboard and my head swiveled to the kitchen table where my father, still unaware of my presence, sat. I felt startled at first finding the kitchen inhabited so late into the night, and then almost embarrassed that I was intruding on such a private moment. I decided it would be best for me to swig some water from my bathroom sink to not intrude when my father spoke as I was trying to remember if I had a cup to use.

"Come sit, sweetheart," he said to me, his voice cracking while confirming my lack of stealth.

With no reason to hide my being there any longer, I nervously made my way to sit in the chair to the right of him as he wiped his eyes on his shirt sleeve, leaving spots of darker gray behind as the wetness transferred from the surface of his skin to the cotton of his shirt. Although the room was only dimly lit by the full moon outside the windows, I could tell his already green eyes seem more piercing now from the subtle redness around them. As I sat down, he cleared his throat.

"Your grandfather was a good man," he stated, his voice gaining back its strength, pushing that pain back into its box. "He was hardworking and could come off a bit cold, but a good man nonetheless. He loved his family."

I had never met my grandfather. He died the same day I was born from pancreatic cancer. His death day was my birthday. My dad used to always say that the joy of me being born saved him from the heartache he felt from his own father dying, but every year on my birthday I could tell it was harder on him than he let on. Especially the times I would find him staring off out the window and into the tree just outside his country home with a wet glaze over his green eyes that vanished so quickly with the rapid blinks he took that I questioned if it was ever there in the first place. 20 years of my life were filled with stories from my father about his father, but somehow this story felt like it was going to be different. More important, given the way I found my father before it started, and given the day it was today.

"He had a pet owl when I was younger," he said. "Well, he called it a pet, but I knew even as a kid that an owl couldn't really be a pet. But he said it was this caramel brown thing that lived out in the area of the barn he kept his tools in. He claimed he liked it because 'it ate all those dang mice' but the way he would stare off into the direction of the barn when he thought no one was looking made me think otherwise, like...like that owl meant something to him. Something he would never tell me no matter how many times I asked him about that distant look in his eyes, but something important nonetheless. Year after year, he said that 'the owl showed up today' and then be content for the rest of the day

no matter how good or how bad the day was. And I could not for the life of me understand why that owl meant so much to him, why it even mattered whether it showed up or not."

He took a breath from speaking as he stood up and walked to the cupboard to grab a glass from it. We stayed in comfortable silence while he filled the glass with water from the fridge, the only sound being the stream of water echoing around the opening of the small glass paired with the lull of the air conditioner, keeping the heat of the summer night at bay in the small house. He walked back over to the table and set the glass in front of me with a knowing soft smile on his face like he knew that I still must have been thirsty, but I had forgotten that was the reason I came to the kitchen in the first place.

He sat back down as he continued, "Up to the day he died in that same house I grew up in, he would call me every once in a while after I moved out. But every year without fail, he would tell me that the owl was still coming around." He laughed, "I would tell him he was crazy since there's no way that owl had been alive for so many years, but he swore to God it was that same owl." His smile faded and he took a steadying breath before I spoke for the first time since entering the kitchen.

"Did you ever see the owl?" I asked. His eyebrows rose a bit as if he were expecting me to ask that question. Sometimes my dad knew me better than I knew myself.

He looked at me with a content expression, the green in his eyes seeming back to their normal hue, "Not 'til the day you were born" he said.

I knew I must have looked confused with lowered brows and mouth slightly agape as I tried to figure out what he meant exactly, but he just smiled softly at me as he stood and kissed my forehead and said "Happy birthday, sweetheart", and then made his way back to his bedroom. I turned my confused eyes out the window as I heard the subtle click of his door closing, and gazed towards the tree he had been staring at just moments before as if that tree knew the answer of what that story meant, but saw nothing but the branches basking in the dim moonlight, slightly dancing in the summer breeze.

My father died today, about 10 years after telling me about the owl he and my grandfather would see sometimes. I spent those 10 years thinking about that story, something about it not quite making sense to me, but unable to figure out what that was exactly. For 10 years I pestered my dad with questions about it, whereas he would reply "You'll understand someday, I'm sure of it" or "It'll make sense eventually". I even found myself following his gaze sometimes when he thought no one was looking, but could never find what grabbed his attention outside that window.

Googling how long owls live for, how popular they are in the area my father grew up in and the area he resided in the years after, but whatever hidden meaning he wanted me to

find within his words, I couldn't find it. I found myself even staring at that tree just outside the kitchen window when I was at his house in the years following as if the answer I was looking for was intertwined with the growing branches. The tree would get bigger but I could never find the answer within it.

As I'm sitting here staring out the window in his kitchen on the day he died with boxes filled with memories surrounding me, the tears are racing each other down my cheeks as another pair of eyes stare back at me from the bare tree outside. That same tree that had been empty to me for years. That same tree that danced to muted music when I tried my hardest to hear what was playing. Those piercing green eyes staring back at me contrasted with the caramel-colored feathers and the gloomy evening outside creates a rush of understanding in my mind. Finding one missing puzzle piece after years of searching and finally being able to place it to reveal the entire picture. One loose bulb in a string of lights twisted ever so slightly to the right and the entire string lights up.

Being in a box with only one poked hole to breathe from and finally being able to remove the lid.

Understanding mixed with thankfulness and grief and *comfort*.

An unyielding stare from a pair of green eyes that somehow I'm sure I'll see again next year. And the next. And the next.

*Hi dad.*



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