Breaking the frame: Introduction to Metafiction

Professor Stephanie Wells
Fall 2021
Mondays, noon-1:30 pm

In this course, we will examine the genre of literature known as postmodernism, and more specifically, the concept of metafiction. As readers, we’re conditioned to expect an author to follow a certain set of conventions when we open a book. What is the contract between the reader and the author, and what happens when that contract is broken, our readerly expectations violated? Whom can you trust if you can’t trust the author? In this class, we will explore the boundaries of narrative and examine texts with shifting perspectives, destabilized narrators, and contradictory plotlines.

Note: All texts will be available in PDF form on the OLLI website except the Calvino and Vonnegut novels, which you’ll need to procure yourselves, and the Kaufman film, currently for rent on Youtube and available on Amazon Prime.

Tentative reading list (subject to minor tinkering)

Week 1: Introduction to Metafiction
Jorge Luis Borges, “Borges and I”
Julio Cortazar, “A Continuity of Parks”

Week 2: Jorge Luis Borges, “The Circular Ruins”
Margaret Atwood, “Happy Endings”
Tim O’Brien, “How to Tell a True War Story”

Week 3: Archibald MacLeish, “Ars Poetica”
Mark Strand, “The Story of Our Lives”
Donald Barthelme, “The Balloon”

Week 4: John Barth, “Lost in the Funhouse”
Italo Calvino, If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler

Week 5: Italo Calvino, If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler
Tom Stoppard, “The Real Inspector Hound”

Week 6: Charlie Kaufman, Adaptation (film)

Week 7: Amy Hempel, “The Harvest”
David Foster Wallace, “Octet”

Week 8: Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five