Breaking the frame: Introduction to Metafiction

In this course, we will examine the genre of literature known as postmodernism, and more specifically, the concept of metafiction. As readers, we are 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? What have we been socialized to expect 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.

Tentative reading list

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 OR Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five