

Introduction to Speculative Fiction



1) A portfolio containing a variety of pieces of creative writing that explore speculative fiction.

2) A reflective essay in which you chart the development of your creative work through reading, reflection, workshopping, editing and redrafting.

What are we working towards?

TURNITIN DEADLINE: Sunday 19th November 23:59 (But don't leave it until then!)



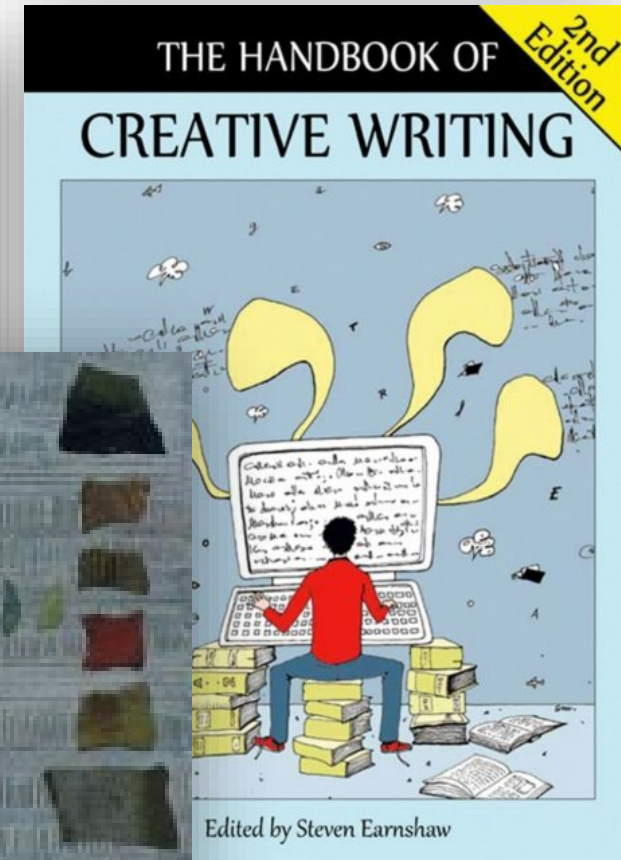
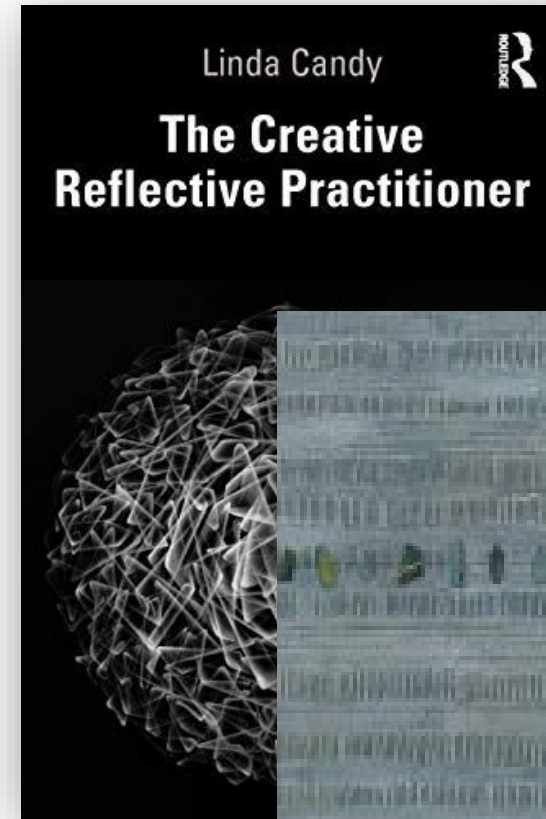
The Reflective Essay

A record of your journey

- The purpose of this essay is to help you develop your reflective practice as a creative writer.
- Reflective practice is the academic part of Creative Writing: the part where you analyse the process of creating a piece of writing.
- You need to actively observe where the work comes from, how it develops, and the ways in which you shape the writing into a product that you are happy to present to the world.



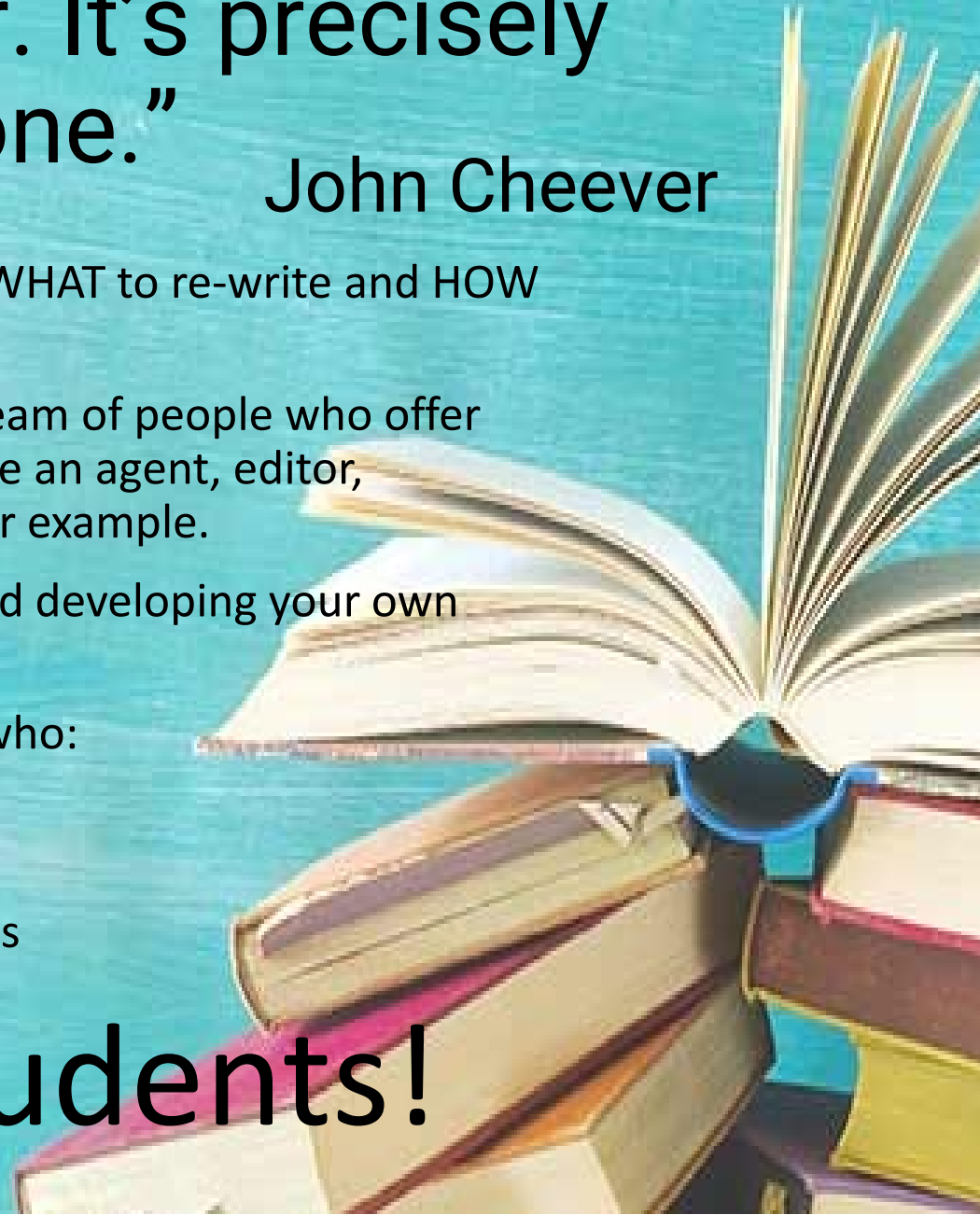
Some Key Texts:



“I can’t write without a reader. It’s precisely like a kiss—you can’t do it alone.” John Cheever

- The largest part of writing is re-writing, but in order to know WHAT to re-write and HOW to re-write it, every writer needs feedback.
- If you embark upon a career in writing, you will work with a team of people who offer feedback, constructive criticism and suggestions. This might be an agent, editor, publishing team, TV development team, or a commissioner for example.
- You need to be skilled at responding positively to feedback and developing your own critical analytical skills for redrafting.
- It is important that you take on board feedback from people who:
 - understand the field of Creative Writing
 - know what you are trying to achieve
 - can suggest strategies that will help you achieve your aims
 - In other words...

...your fellow students!



WORKSHOPPING

- Everyone needs to sign up to the rota on Teams > General > Files.
- Each person should post their work on the Moodle Forum **no later than Saturday evening**.
- Everyone should read the work, and make notes on their copy.
- At the end of the workshop, all students should send their notes to the person whose work they have commented upon.
- This will form valuable content for the reflective essay.



HOW ARE WE WORKSHOPPING?

The workshop sessions will run like this:

- The person whose work is being workshopped will have a chance to present their work – **what they intended and what they hoped to achieve**. They may have some specific questions that they want the rest of us to address.
- Once this presentation has happened the writer should spend the rest of the time listening... **NOT defending, or explaining or justifying – but listening**.
- When you are offering your critique, **USE this opportunity to practice your analytical skills** - the tools of reflective practice.
- At the end, when everyone has had a chance to say something, **the writer will have a chance to ask some more questions** that might arise from the discussion, or interrogate the comments of their readers.



HOW TO GIVE FEEDBACK

- Be constructive! Your feedback should help the writer **BUILD** on what they already have.
- It is totally unhelpful to say “**Yes its good, I liked it.**” WHAT do you mean by ‘like’? Did the piece resonate with you on an emotional level? **If so, how? Why?** Can you identify the specific words or phrases that worked on you?
- Which parts were less effective and why? **How could they be improved?** What suggestions can you offer to the writer?
- **Focus on the craft of writing** rather than your own personal preferences. If you don’t like the genre, focus on the effectiveness of the writing in terms of structure, pace, characterisation, plot.
- **Focus also on what the writer was trying to achieve.** We need to know the criteria against which we are measuring the work. If it is meant to be a horror but it reads like a mystery, then the work is not functioning as the writer intended.
- **Offer suggestions for improving the piece – in the writer’s terms – rather than your own.**



STORIES THAT TRANSCEND TIME

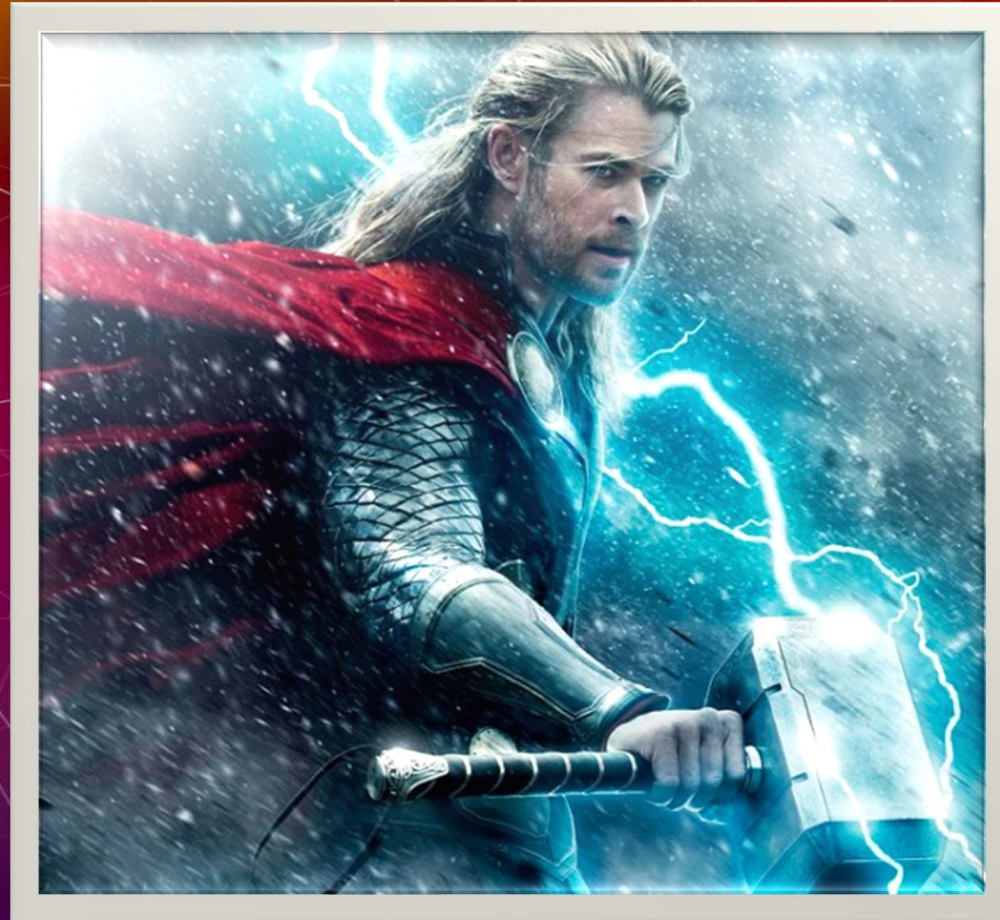


The runic inscription on this 10th century Viking 'Mjölnir' amulet reads:
Hmar x is (This is a hammer).

STORIES THAT TRANSCEND TIME



The runic inscription on this 10th century Viking 'Mjöllnir' amulet reads: Hmar x is (This is a hammer).



Thor, dir. By Kenneth Branagh (Marvel, 2011)

ASGARD



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गिरि
सिर
माव
वोहि
षर
तप्रा
तैसा
शंग
लील

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The Turkish Book of Dede Korkut: circa 14th C CE.

Y MABINOGI

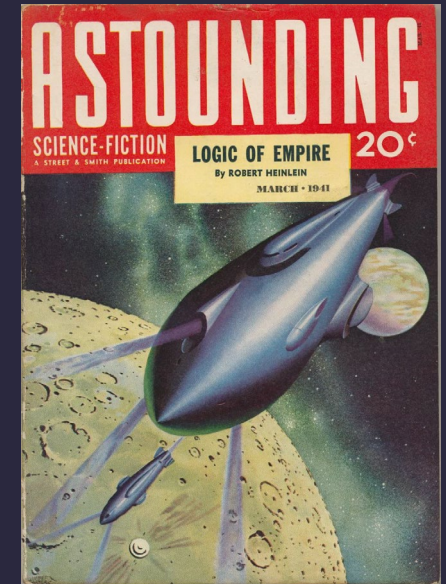
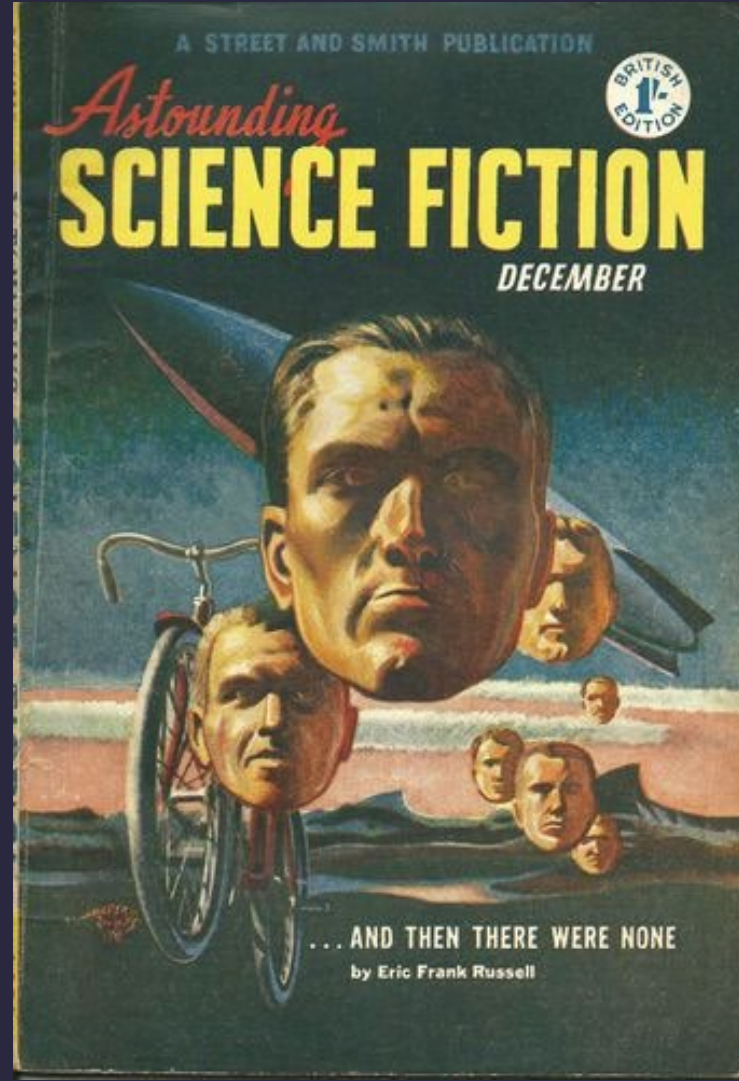


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- Llyfr Coch Hergest: the Red Book of Hergest c. 1382.
- Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch: the White Book of Rhydderch c. 1325–1400

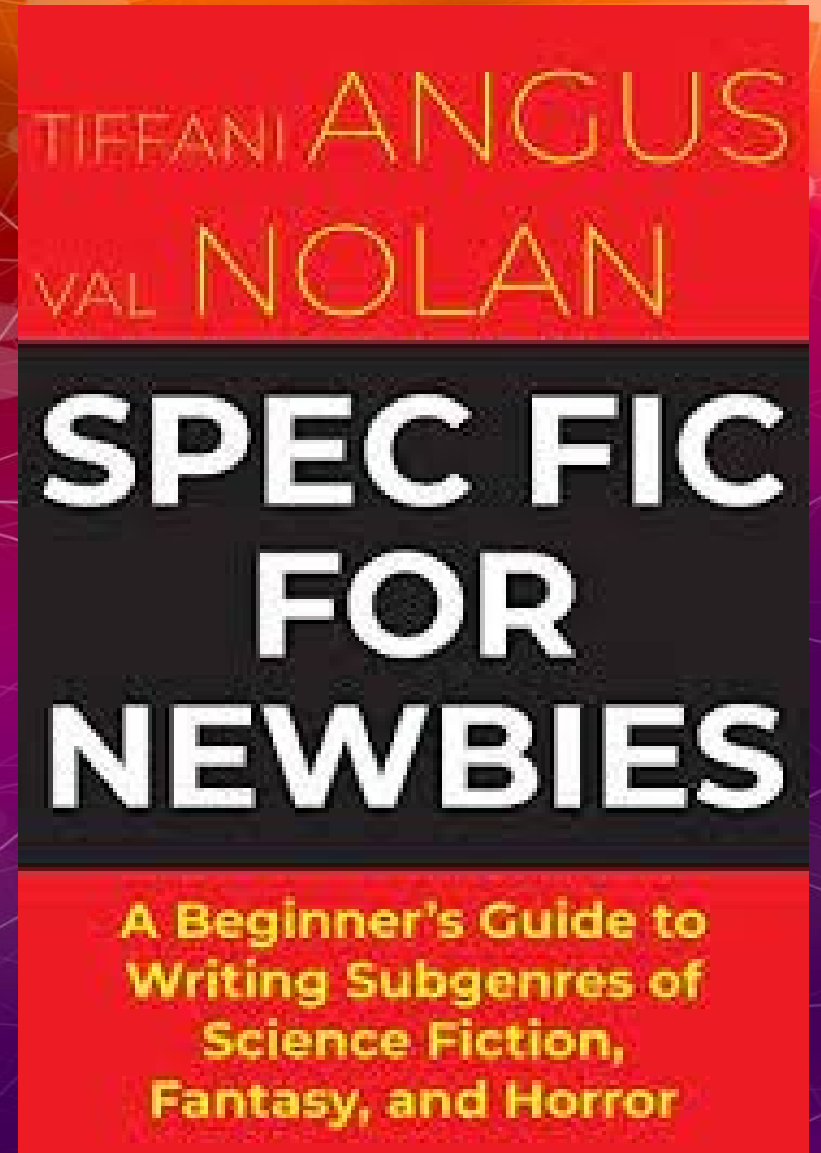
Speculative Fiction

- Speculative fiction is the umbrella term for a number of different genres of fiction, each with speculative elements that are based on conjecture and do not exist in the real world.
- What they all have in common is that they change the laws of what's real or possible as we know them in our world or society, and then speculate on the outcome.
- The main difference between the genres is the manner and degree to which they depart from the world as we know it.



“Science Fiction is almost always about the time in which it is written (or about something happening in the author’s life). It’s a way of conceptualising and expressing big ideas that aren’t easily captured.”

Tiffani Angus and Val Nolan, *Spec Fic for Newbies: A Beginner’s Guide to Writing Subgenres of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror* (Edinburgh: Luna Press Publishing, 2023) p. 9.



Speculative Fiction

(not an exhaustive list!)

High Fantasy: Stories with epic themes, characters, and plot, set in worlds far removed from Earth. E.g. *The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien (1954).

Magic realism: These are stories that appear to be set in our world... however, there are one or more magical elements that are part of that world. E.g. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915); *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1967); *A Universal History of Infamy* (1935) by Jorge Luis Borges.

Science fiction: stories with imagined technologies that don't exist in the real world, like time travel, aliens, and robots.

Sci-fi fantasy fiction: sci-fi stories inspired by mythology, folklore, and fairy tales that combine imagined technologies with elements of magic realism.

Speculative Fiction

(not an exhaustive list!)

Supernatural fiction: sci-fi stories about secret knowledge or hidden abilities including witchcraft, spiritualism, and psychic abilities. E.g. *Carrie* by Stephen King (1974).

Urban Fantasy Fiction: fantasy stories that take place in an urban setting in the real world but operate under magical rules. E.g. *Northern Lights* by Philip Pullman (1995)

Utopian fiction: stories about civilizations the authors deem to be perfect, ideal societies (but often turn out not to be!). E.g. *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915); *Erewhon* by Samuel Butler (1872)

Dystopian fiction: stories about societies deemed problematic within the world of the novel, often satirizing government rules, poverty, and oppression. E.g. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (1949); *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985)

Speculative Fiction

(not an exhaustive list!)

Apocalyptic fiction: stories that take place before and during a huge disaster that wipes out a significant portion of the world's population. The stories centre around characters doing everything they can to stay alive—for example, running from zombies or trying to avoid a deadly plague. E.g. *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood.

Post-apocalyptic fiction: that take place after an apocalyptic event and focus on the survivors figuring out how to navigate their new circumstances—for example, emerging after a global nuclear holocaust or surviving a total breakdown of society. E.g. *The Blue Book of Nesbo* by Manon Steffan Ros.

Alternative History fiction: stories that focus on true historical events but are written as if they unfolded with different outcomes. E.g. Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*.

Superhero fiction: superheroes using extraordinary abilities to fight supervillains.

Some Canonical Texts...

The Dispossessed by Ursula Le Guin (1974)

Kindred by Octavia Butler (1979)

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985)

R.U.R. by Karel Capek (1921)

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley (1932)

War of The Worlds by H.G. Wells (1897)

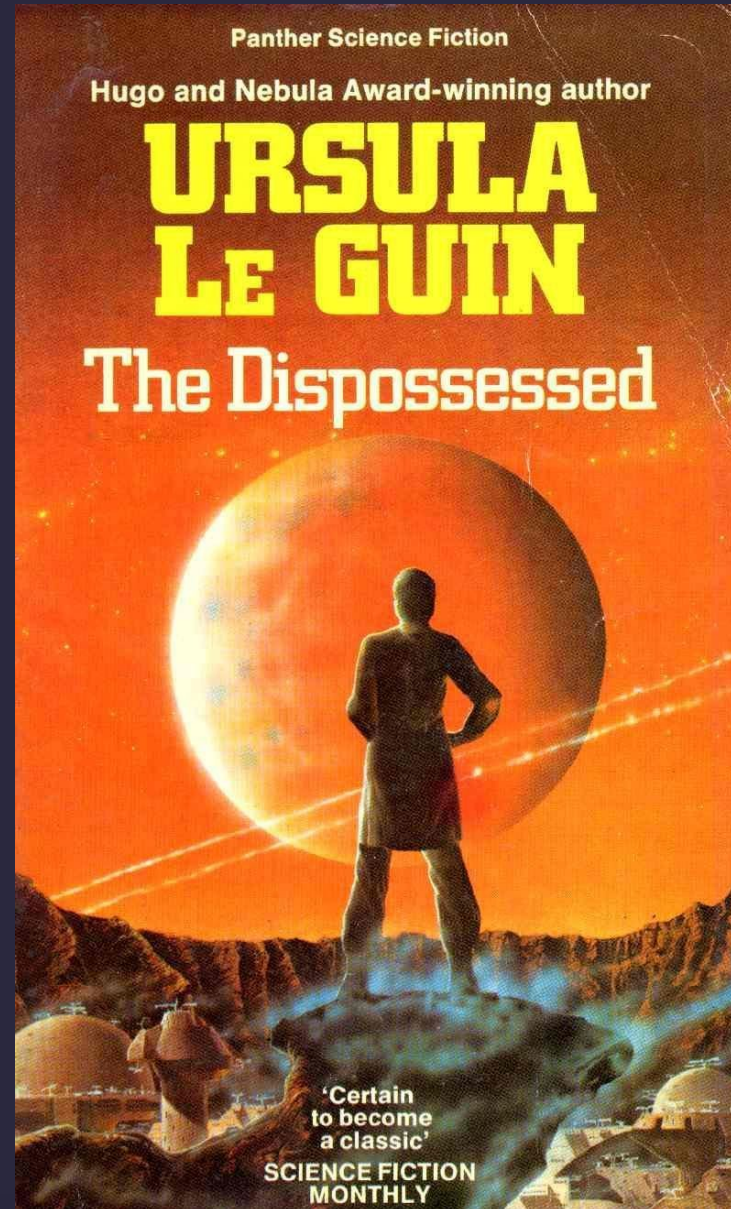
The Time Machine by H.G. Wells (1895)

Donovan's Brain by Curt Siodmak (1942)

Gulliver's Travels (1726), Jonathan Swift

1984 by George Orwell (1942)

We by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1924)



Verisimilitude

“The other novelists say ‘Here is something that might occur your lives,’ the fantasist says ‘Here’s something that could not occur. I must ask you first to accept my book as a whole, and secondly to accept certain things in my book.’ Readers can grant the first request, but refuse the second...The general tone of novels is so literal that when the fantastic is introduced it produces a special effect: some readers are thrilled, other choked off: it demands an additional adjustment because of the oddness of its method or subject matter – like a sideshow in an exhibition where you have to pay sixpence as well as the original entrance fee. Some readers pay with delight, it is for the sideshows that they entered the exhibition...Others refuse with indignation...”

E M Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Dover Publications, 2022) p.65.

Vivid Descriptions

**Provide sensory 'proofs':
take extra time and
attention to create a world
that the reader can imagine
with all their senses.**



Octavia Butler
1947-2006

Tell stories
Filled with
Facts.
Make People
Touch and
Taste and
KNOW.
Make People
FEEL!
FEEL!
FeEL!

Avoiding ‘White Space’

“Action and dialogue are happening, but they seem detached from the surroundings. The reader can’t visualise the scene and so it loses its impact and invites skimming. Two useful words here are orient and anchor.”

Kim Wilkins, ‘Genre and Speculative Fiction’ in *Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing*, ed. by David Morley, and Philip Neilsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 44.

Make the abstract CONCRETE

- Ask yourself if the reader can 'see' the things you are describing?
- Words such as weird, amazing, beautiful, sensational are abstract concepts, not descriptions.
- To make a sense of place vivid, we need to 'show' rather than 'tell'. If you're not sure what this means, there's a great video here: [How to Show, Not Tell: The Complete Writing Guide – YouTube](#)

“Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

Anton Chekhov



Painting with Words

Be specific:

- Make every word count: chair = Armchair? Dining room chair? Eisteddfod chair?
- Where will you place your focus? What does your reader need to know? Which are the most important aspects? Age? Quality? Level of wear?
- What does your character notice? What does the narrator notice that the character does not?

Use sensory language:

- How does the place LOOK, SMELL, SOUND, FEEL, and TASTE?

Use imagery:

- Similes and metaphors help the reader 'see' through comparison.
- Avoid dead metaphors and clichés.



“Just as everyone is a walking advertisement for who he or she is, so every room is a little showcase of its occupants’ values and personalities. Every room is about memory. Every room gives us layers of information about our past and present and who we are, our shrines and quirks and hopes and sorrows, our attempts to prove that we exist and are more or less okay. You can see, in our rooms, how much light we need – how many light bulbs, candles, skylight we have – and in how we keep things lit you can see how we try to comfort ourselves. The mix in our rooms is so touching: the clutter and the cracks in the wall belie a bleakness or brokenness in our lives, while photos and a few rare objects show our pride, our rare shining moments.”

Anne Lamont, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Random House, 1995) pp. 74-5.

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“The place seemed to be a geometrically reconfigured 1960s bachelor pad, with open stone work, pile carpeting and magnificently ugly mushroom-shaped stained-glass lampshades ... they walked past it into the pizzeria-cafeteria, empty but for an elderly black man, wearing a bright check suit and canary-yellow gloves... A black cigarillo was burning in the ashtray in front of him.”

“... and then the red and white lights of the carousel stretched and shivered and went out and he was falling through an ocean of stars, while the mechanical waltz was replaced by a pounding rhythmic roll and crash, as of cymbals or the breakers on the shores of a far ocean.”

Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (London: Headline, 2001), pp. 127– 40.



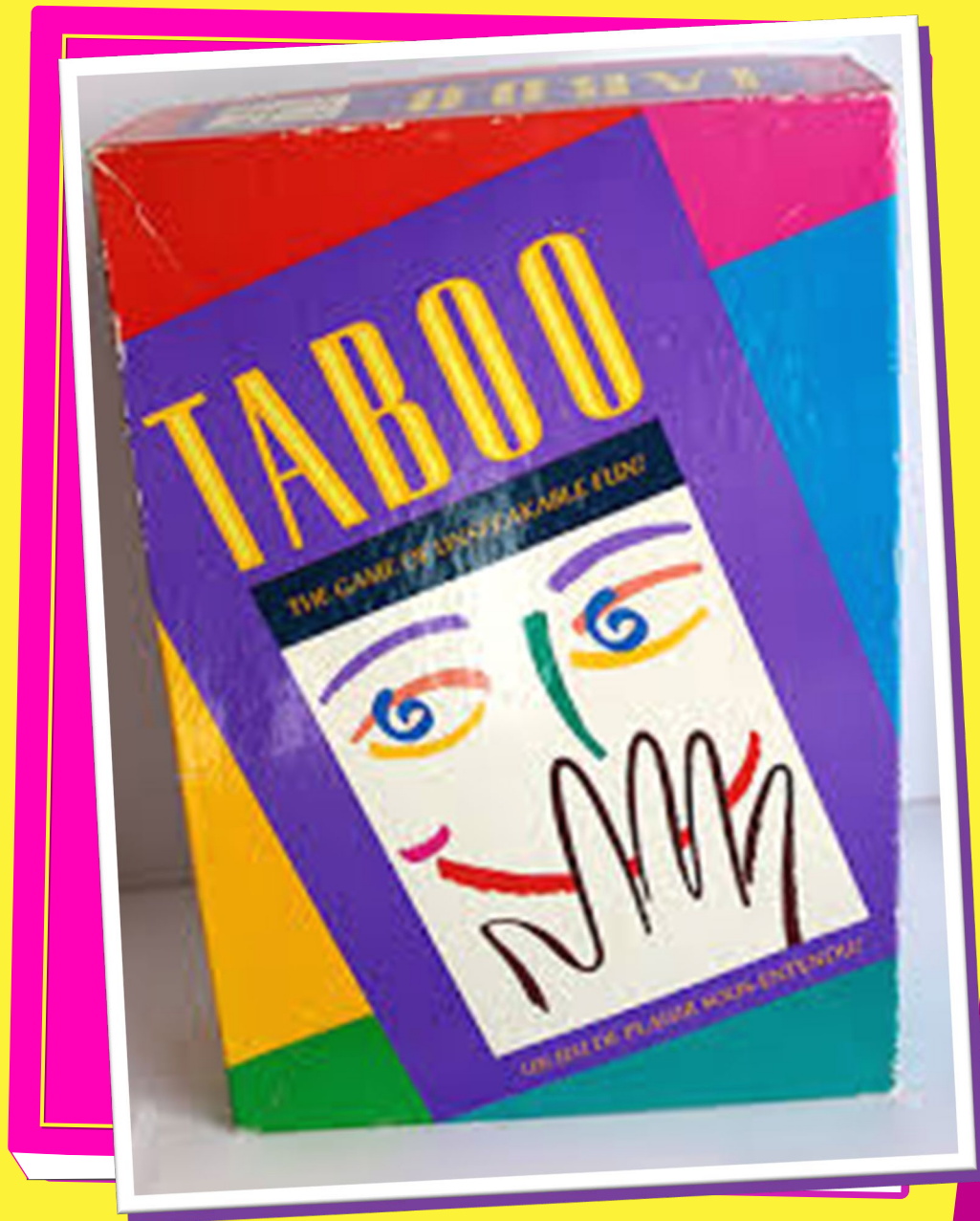
DEFAMILIARISATION

“And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "enstranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious." The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artefact itself is quite unimportant.”

Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. by Benjamin Sher (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), p. 6.

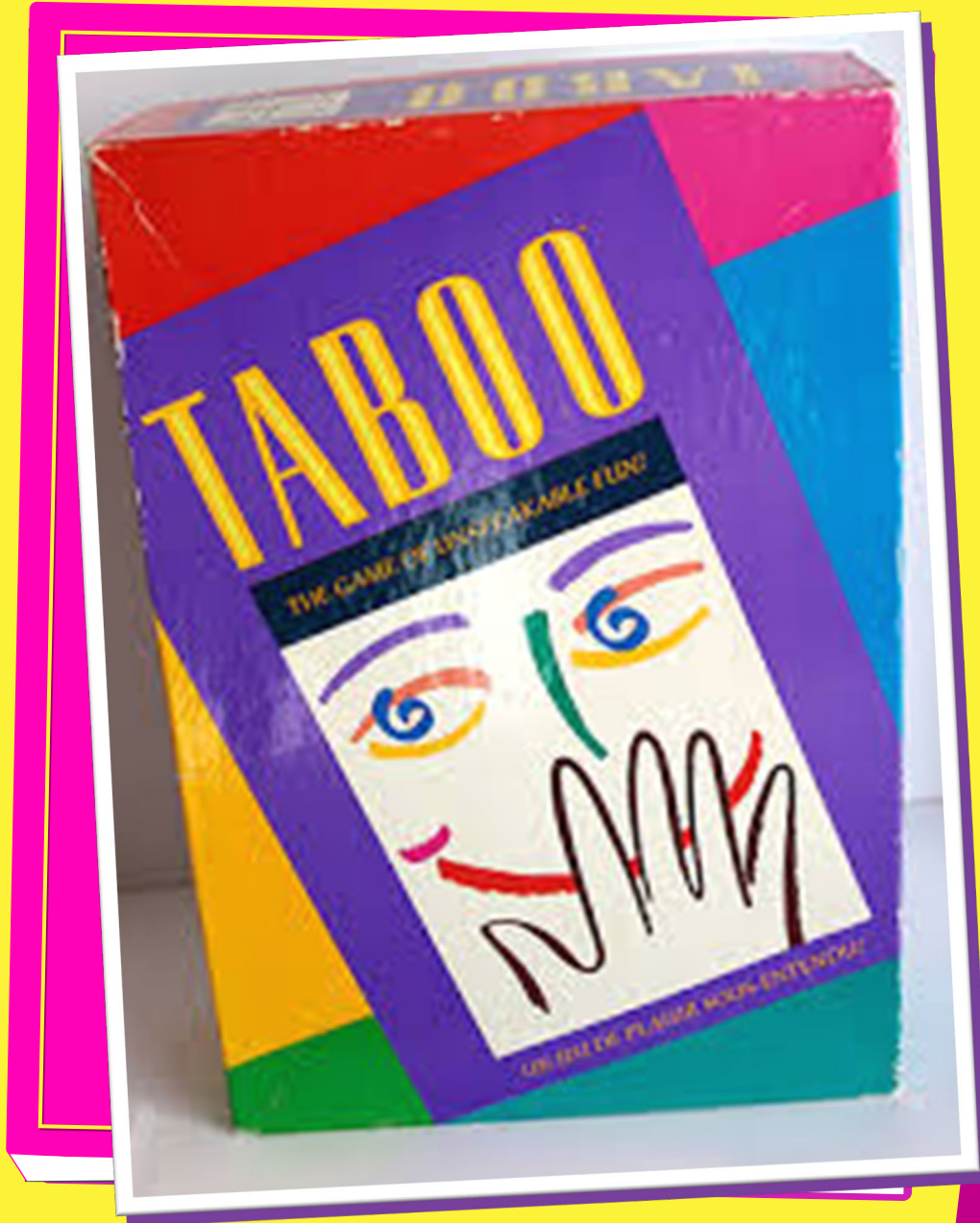


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**Describe a
word without
using a
particular set
of words.**

For example...



PEBBLE

COOL

Round

pale

Smooth



PEBBLE

~~COOL~~

~~Round~~

~~pale~~

~~Smooth~~

It has no edges; it's a seamless whole. It fits in my hand like a frozen egg, but there is no life inside it. It's an oval of pure geology.

TREE

APPLE

Bow tie

pigeon

Squid

TREE

APPLE

Boat tie

pigeon

Squid

MIRROR

CHURCH

GIVING BIRTH

WINDOW

PEELING AN ORANGE

SCHOOL

CANDLE

MAKING A CUP OF TEA

HOSPITAL

FLOWER

TRIMMING A BEARD

CURTAIN

SHOP

GROOMING A HORSE

Creative Writing Exercise:

Write an account of an aliens arriving on Earth, from the point of view of the alien.