

ENG2091G: Pandemic! Narratives of Contagion and Disease
Department of English and Cultural Studies
Huron University College
Winter 2022

Class: Mondays 6:30PM-9:30PM
Room: W108

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Course Description:

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak to be a global pandemic. COVID-19 is the deadliest pandemic in human history since the so-called “Spanish flu” or H1N1 influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 that killed approximately 20 – 50 million people across the globe. Consequently, all of us have experienced an extraordinary historical event that has radically altered our society and our lives. To engage with the traumatic realities of the pandemic and its after-effects, we must arguably rely on storytelling as a means of making sense of our experiences and to move forward to a post-pandemic chapter. This course will offer the opportunity for students to reflect on the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic and its after-effects. How do we rely on narrative to understand disease on an individual and global scale? How do stories of illness become “viral” and “infect” the minds of those they reach? How can we utilize fiction as a means of escapism/survival from bleak realities?

This course explores popular culture narratives of contagion and disease to unpack why literary and cultural works utilize literal and fictional narratives of deadly pandemics. There is an extensive history of pandemic literature, and the genre arguably originates with Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), set in the twenty-first century after a global pandemic causes humanity to become extinct. Other notable examples of pandemic literature include Nobel Prize winning authors Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) and José Saramago’s *Blindness* (1998). These examples gesture towards our longstanding cultural fascination with the idea of pandemics, both real and imagined, because of our analogous interest with societal breakdown, as well as how the idea of contagion or viral spread threatens borders and our associated feelings of security. What are the societal “illnesses” that metaphorically plague our communities?

The course will be divided into three sections that examine:

- 1) historical fictional accounts of real pandemics;
- 2) fictional pandemics that focus on the “outbreak” narrative (i.e. how deadly viruses spread);
- 3) the post-apocalyptic genre (i.e. the after-effects of a pandemic)

ENG2091G will primarily focus on popular culture novels and films, such as *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), *Outbreak* (1995), *Contagion* (1995), *World War Z* (2006), and *Songbird* (2020), although it may also include short stories and graphic fiction.