

Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg  
Institute for Advanced Study

*Fiction* MEETS *Science*

## Uses of Literature and the Case of the Science Novel

A Workshop with Rita Felski

Friday, 15 December 2017  
9:30 – 15:00

Organizers:

Sina Farzin, University of Hamburg

Natalie Roxburgh, University of Siegen



Program

**Venue:**

Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg  
Institute for Advanced Study  
Lehmkuhlenbusch 4  
27753 Delmenhorst  
Germany  
[www.h-w-k.de](http://www.h-w-k.de)

## USES OF LITERATURE AND THE CASE OF SCIENCE NOVEL

How is literature *used*? There are many ways to answer this question. In traditional literary criticism grounded in aesthetics, the literary work is seen as having no particular use, as being 'above' other cultural concerns. In Marxist literary criticism, there is no end to the use of a literary work, as its task is to produce and deploy ideologies. Most contemporary approaches lie somewhere in between these extremes. In sociology as well as in many recent approaches to literary studies, literature is useful for understanding society: Literary texts have been investigated as forms of sense-making or unmaking, tools of world-building, models for producing empathy, and as sources of information or knowledge.

The question of use has been important for discussions on the Fiction Meets Science group's research on the science novel. In particular, we have become interested in the way highly specific forms of scientific knowledge and its production are depicted, and how these depictions shape societal concepts of scientific work in terms of its results, its social embeddedness, and its impact on society. Our readings have reached far beyond the theoretical assumption that a work is an aesthetic object removed from social concerns, and we have focused in large part on the uses of the science novel. And yet, unlike textbooks, political propaganda, science journalism, or science communication pamphlets, these novels represent science as a subject matter for ends that are neither purely political nor practical.

In this interdisciplinary discussion, social scientists and literary scholars from within and beyond FMS will present their findings and questions on the uses of the science novel and respond to the work of Rita Felski, a literary scholar who argues that literary works *actively* engage with their historical and social contexts. Felski's *oeuvre* has been inspiring to many scholars working on science novels because, rather than unmasking power or promoting an apolitical aestheticism, these texts seem to connect with the world around them in useful ways, enticing us to read for many reasons, all the while preserving aesthetic concerns.

This workshop will feature a presentation by Rita Felski, short presentations by scholars working on science novels, and a structured roundtable discussion. Each contribution will discuss contemporary science novels through the lens of one or both of Prof. Felski's two key works: *Uses of Literature* (2008) and *Limits of Critique* (2015). Throughout the workshop, there will be a chance for audience contributions and discussion.

## **RITA FELSKI**

Rita Felski is a Professor of English at the University of Virginia and the editor of the journal *New Literary History*. Her current research centers on questions of method and interpretation. Recent Publications include *The Limits of Critique* (2015), *Uses of Literature* (2008), and, most recently, *Critique and Postcritique* (co-edited with Elizabeth Anker 2017). She also has longstanding interests in feminist theory, modernity and postmodernity, genre (especially tragedy), comparative literature, and cultural studies. In 2016, Felski was awarded the Niels Bohr Professorship at the University of Southern Denmark where she is leading the interdisciplinary research program [Uses of literature: The social dimensions of literature](#).

## **FICTION MEETS SCIENCE**

FMS is a research and writers' fellowship program that brings together sociologists, literary scholars, novelists, and scientists to examine the literary and social ramifications of narratives about the natural sciences. From 2014 to the present, we have looked at contemporary literary and mainstream fiction; beginning in 2018, we will focus our attention on the global dimensions and diverse regional contexts of science, and look at a broader cross-section of narrative forms and media. FMS is funded by grants from the Volkswagen Foundation, as well as support from the University of Bremen, Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg, and University of Oldenburg. *For more information see* [www.fictionmeetsscience.org](http://www.fictionmeetsscience.org)

## **REGISTRATION**

Space is limited, so please register in advance by sending an email to Sina Farzin ([sina.farzin@wiso.uni-hamburg.de](mailto:sina.farzin@wiso.uni-hamburg.de)) by November 30th and indicate if you would like a vegetarian meal. If you are new to the FMS workshops, please include a line or two about your background or interest in the workshop.

## **AGENDA**

- 9:30 Welcome and Introduction  
*Sina Farzin and Natalie Roxburgh*
- 9:45 – 11:00 Hooked: Literature and Attachment  
*Rita Felski*  
Comments: *Uwe Schimank, Felix Sprang*
- 11:00 – 11:15 Coffee Break
- 11:15 – 12:45 *Odds Against Tomorrow*  
*Sina Farzin and Natalie Roxburgh*  
Books of Life: Genetics in the Contemporary Novel  
*Paul Hamann*  
Climate Change Fiction  
*Alexandra Nikoleris and Johannes Stripple*
- 12:45 – 13:45 Lunch in the HWK Bistro
- 13:45 – 15:00 Roundtable Discussion

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Sina Farzin** is a Junior Professor for Social Theory at the University of Hamburg and a Co-Director of the Fiction Meets Science Program. She works on dystopian and utopian science novels as literary forms of social critique.

**Paul Haman** is a Research Associate at the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Hamburg, where he is teaching and working towards his PhD on genetics in the contemporary novel.

**Alexandra Nikoleris** is a doctoral student in Environmental and Energy Systems Studies at Lund University in Sweden. Together with Johannes Stripple she co-convenes the collaborative initiative ‘Narrating Climate Futures’.

**Natalie Roxburgh** is a post-doctoral researcher in Anglophone literature and culture at the University of Siegen, as well as a member of the Fiction Meets Science research consortium. She is interested in the relationship between formal aspects of literary texts and developments in other forms of knowledge, in particular science and economics. Her current projects focus on the poetics and aesthetics of ‘disinterestedness’, and on psychopharmacology and literature.

**Uwe Schimank** is a professor for Sociology at the University of Bremen and Co-Director of the Fiction Meets Science Program. He works on the reception of science novels and on the literary depiction of scientific work and institutions in different global regions.

**Felix Sprang** is a professor of English literature at the University of Siegen. He works on the intersection of literature and the ‘arts and sciences’ in early modern England, as well as on the connection between literature and science across all literary periods. He is also interested in the aesthetics of literary texts and methods derived from the project “Kulturwissenschaft”, in particular the work of Aby Warburg and Ernst Cassirer.

**Johannes Stripple** is associate professor of political science, Lund University, Sweden. Johannes’ has traced the governance of climate change through a range of sites, from the UN to the urban and the everyday. Together with Alexandra Nikoleris he co-convenes the collaborative initiative ‘Narrating Climate Futures’