

Conference Abstract

Beyond Metaphor: Science as Subject in the Contemporary Literary Novel

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A novelist is exploring human relationships to the natural environment in the late twentieth century and finds herself writing about science. It's a story of creativity and discovery, doubt and faith, personal obsession and universal consequence—a grand topic for a novel. But what does it mean to create a novel that takes science, writ large, as its main subject matter, a novel that is about doing science and the people who do it and the knowledge produced and what happens to that knowledge when it goes out into society? Can the novel as a form handle that? Can it deal with characters who are defined by their daily work and stories that can't be told without exploring the substance and activities of that work in intimate detail? How can we experience the world from the perspective of a character who thinks in the iconic languages of chemistry or mathematics, if we, as readers, have no concept of such languages? How, in general, does the novel deal with abstract specialized knowledge? And how, in particular, does this oh-so-subjective of art forms deal with knowledge that is, by definition, construed as objective? Where are the precedents, where are the models?

In this talk, I'll tell the story of a certain kind of novel that has gained ground in the Anglo-Saxon literature over the past twenty years. Novelists are writing about the experience of knowledge that is generally the privilege of some small sector of society. We are writing about work. And, we are writing about science. I'll tell my story in the first person, from the perspective of a novelist, reader, and lapsed geochemist, using examples from my own work and raising questions that I hope literary scholars, philosophers, and sociologists may someday be able to answer. Is the ever-flexible evolving form of the novel allowing us to write about science, or is the urge to write about science changing the form of the novel? What does this imply about or for

readers? Can the magical power of the novel to generate empathy with its subject propagate new understandings of science?