

SUPERNATURAL FOLKLORE



INSTRUCTOR

Dr. Sydney K. Varajon
(she/her)

Come by to talk with me,
ask me questions, etc.!
T 11:30a-12:30p (Zoom)
W 11a-1p (FAC 274)
& by appointment



COURSE

Asynchronous/
Online via Blackboard



EMAIL

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Ghosts, witches, cryptids and other supernatural beings are immensely popular and appear in contemporary novels, video games, films, and other media. Belief in the supernatural is explored in television shows that detail the exploits of “ghost hunters” or probe the possibility of extraterrestrial encounters. Statistics gathered by Gallup Poll indicate that an extremely large percentage of North Americans not only believe in the supernatural, but in fact believe that they themselves have had a supernatural or paranormal experience. “Evidence” of the supernatural is, in this sense, all around us. What do people find so compelling about the supernatural? And why, as scholars, should we concern ourselves with the study of supernatural tradition? This course examines the many forms of supernatural belief that people express through traditional genres and through popular media. We will explore the forms supernatural tradition and belief take in everyday life and develop models for understanding how supernatural belief relates to other aspects of worldview and culture.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Midterm Exam	20%
Final Exam	20%
Grimoire: A Personal Portfolio of (Oc)Cultural Ethnographic Explorations (3)	35%
Collaborative Digital Compendium Entry	10%
Participation	15%
Discussion Posts & Engagement	
Reading Quizzes	

REQUIRED TEXTS

All readings can be found on **Blackboard** or in the **WKU library** research database. (Some titles will appear in the daily schedule; others will be identified and noted as the interests of the class unfold.) You will need nothing besides an internet connection and a capacity to suspend your disbelief to take this course!

That said, in the course extras section below, you will find a list of satisfyingly spooky recommended books and other media with which we will engage throughout the semester.



“As much as we may prefer to think otherwise, we live in an imprecise and ambiguous world, which in its inexactitude allows for the awesome, the inexplicable, the wondrous...The folklore of the supernatural can be evidenced in all aspects of our lives.”

— Barbara Walker, *Out of the Ordinary*



Students with documented disabilities who have registered with the **Student Accessibility Resource Center (SARC)** will be appropriately accommodated and should inform the instructor as soon as possible of their needs. SARC is located in Downing Student Union, 1074. SARC can be reached by phone at 270-745-5004 [270-745-3030 TTY] or via email at sarc.connect@wku.edu. Please do not request accommodations directly from the professor or instructor without a faculty notification letter (FNL) from SARC.

Learning Objectives: This course fulfills the Colonnade Program's requirements for the Arts and Humanities subcategory of the Explorations Category. As part of that program, FLK 275 has the following learning objectives:

Students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. Utilize basic formal elements, techniques, concepts and vocabulary of specific disciplines within the Arts and Humanities.
2. Distinguish between various kinds of evidence by identifying reliable sources and valid arguments.
3. Demonstrate how social, cultural, and historical contexts influence creative expression in the arts and humanities.
4. Evaluate the significance of human expression and experience in shaping large social, cultural, and historical contexts.
5. Evaluate enduring and contemporary issues of human experience.

Upon successfully completing this class, you will be able to:

- define folklore and compare and contrast it with popular culture, and apply basic folkloristic concepts and methodologies to the study of the supernatural
- describe and evaluate predominant popular, scholarly, and scientific attitudes and arguments regarding supernatural phenomena, and compare and contrast standards of evidence, belief systems, and epistemologies of the natural and supernatural world
- identify and enumerate examples of supernatural traditions cross-culturally, while connecting specific historical and cultural contexts to the creation of different beliefs and practices related to the supernatural
- explain how specific instances and expressions of supernatural belief have resulted in wide-ranging religious and historical incidents and changes, and evaluate the changing role over time of supernatural belief in popular, academic, legal, medical, religious, artistic, and other contexts
- design and conduct a research project about a particular aspect or genre of supernatural experiences through ethnographic research, then interpret and analyze supernatural experiences in a manner respectful of personal belief and cultural contexts

This course also fulfills part of the requirements for the Folklore minor.



FOLKLORE MINOR

Undergraduates at WKU have a rare opportunity to take a variety of folklore courses and to minor in Folklore. A Folklore minor is fun. Challenging, and gives a unique perspective on contemporary American life. It also helps develop important critical and problem-solving skills for use in the complex personal, social, occupational, and political environments in which we live and work. *These skills will make you a better candidate for employment, for admission into graduate programs in many fields. And for advancement on just about any career path.* For more information, see any Folk Studies faculty member, or visit: <https://www.wku.edu/fsa/folkstudies/minor/php>. You can also talk to me!

COURSE POLICIES

CONDUCT AND RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY POLICY: Along with professional conduct, the course supports an inclusive learning environment **where diversity and individual differences are respected and appreciated**. I expect that, as active participants in the course, you and your fellow classmates will demonstrate a concerted effort to comprehend how other peoples' perspectives and worldviews may be different from your own.

Not all folklore is pretty. Please be aware that this class will occasionally deal with folklore that contains obscene language and/or is inflammatory (e.g., racist, sexist, homophobic). We will also deal with folklore that expresses particular political and ideological positions. The intention is not to promote such folklore but to deal in a critical way with the realities of folklore in contemporary culture. It is imperative that all students speak to one other and to me with respect at all times.

REGULAR AND SUBSTANTIVE INTERACTION. The U.S. Department of Education requires that distance education courses must include regular and substantive interaction between students and faculty. For more information about Regular and Substantive Interaction at WKU, please visit the Regular and Substantive Interaction in Online and Distance Learning [webpage](#). In this course, regular and substantive interaction will take place in the following ways:

1. Weekly announcements
2. Timely and detailed feedback on assignments
3. Zoom office hours by appointment

EMAIL CONTACT: My goal is to answer email within 24 hours. Likewise, you are expected to check your WKU regularly. Occasionally, I will need to send an email, and you are expected to read those emails. If you are emailing about course work, please do so **far enough in advance** that I have time to provide a useful response (Hint: 5am the day an assignment is due is *not* far enough in advance!).

STUDENT WORK must be completed and submitted via *Blackboard* by the posted due date and time. Your work will not be accepted if you have an unexcused absence on the day an assignment is due. You will receive an "F" for that assignment. Late submission of a final graded assignment will result in the **deduction of one full letter grade for each day past the due date (for example, B to C)**. The grade will not be affected when a draft or final graded assignment is late for reasons that would result in an excused absence. Students who know they will miss a class when the assignment is due must contact me in advance to arrange for submission of the assignment.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY: Students are expected to adhere to the honor code and plagiarism rules of WKU. See Student Handbook for what constitutes academic dishonest and consequences (<https://www.wku.edu/handbook/>). **PLAGIARISM** is the unauthorized use of the words or ideas of another person. **[Note: AI tools are not permitted for any type of work in this class. AI is considered academic**

dishonesty and a violation of the WKU Student Code of Conduct, as it is not your own original work. This serious academic offense can result in referral to the Office of Student Conduct. Please remember that at no point should the work of others be presented as your own. Magic can be used for lots of things, but not for your assignments—I want to read your work in your voice! *Please be aware that assignments (including discussion posts, quizzes, exams, and papers) are regularly checked with plagiarism detection software.*

STUDENT RESOURCES

WRITING CENTER ASSISTANCE: The Writing Center on the Bowling Green campus will have writing tutors available to offer advice to current WKU students on any stage of their writing projects. In-person tutoring is available in Cherry Hall 123 from 10-4 Monday through Friday and in the Cravens Commons (at the horseshoe-shaped reference desk) from 5-9 on Sunday through Thursday evenings. WKU students may also request feedback on their writing via email or arrange a real-time Zoom conference to discuss a paper. See instructions and how-to videos on the website (www.wku.edu/writingcenter) for making appointments. Walk-in feedback is available unless we are booked up. Students may also get short writing questions answered via email; just put “Quick question” in the subject line to (writingcenter@wku.edu).

WKU COUNSELING CENTER: The Counseling Center is open throughout the calendar year and closed during the holidays and other specified dates found in the WKU Academic Calendar. The Counseling Center is located in Potter Hall, Room 409. 270-745-3159; counseling.center@wku.edu ; <https://www.wku.edu/heretohelp/>

WKU TITLE IX SEXUAL MISCONDUCT/ASSAULT POLICY AND LINKS TO OTHER USEFUL INFORMATION:

Western Kentucky University (WKU) is committed to supporting faculty, staff and students by upholding WKU’s [Sex and Gender-Based Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation](#) (#0.070) and [Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#) (#0.2040). Under these policies, discrimination, harassment and/or sexual misconduct based on sex/gender are prohibited. If you experience an incident of sex/gender-based discrimination, harassment and/or sexual misconduct, you are encouraged to report it to the Executive Director, Office of Institutional Equity/Title IX Coordinator, Ena Demir, 270-745-6867 or Title IX Investigators or Michael Crowe, 270-745-5429. Please note that while you may report an incident of sex/gender-based discrimination, harassment and/or sexual misconduct to a faculty member, WKU faculty are “Responsible Employees” of the University and MUST report what you share to WKU’s Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Investigator. If you would like to speak with someone who may be able to afford you confidentiality, you may contact WKU’s [Counseling and Testing Center](#) at 270-745-3159.

Additional campus resources are available here: <https://www.wku.edu/syllabusinfo/>

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION

All requirements and assignments must be completed for a passing grade.

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|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| • Participation | 15% |
| ○ Discussion Posts & Engagement | |
| ○ Quizzes | |
| • Grimoire Portfolio Explorations (3) | 35% |
| • Collaborative Compendium Entry | 10% |
| • Midterm Exam | 20% |
| • Final Exam | 20% |
| TOTAL | 100% |

BLACKBOARD GRADEBOOK. Grades will be recorded in the Blackboard Gradebook and will be available once all students' grades are posted. Please note that the blackboard gradebook provides an unweighted total based on points you have earned so far; it does not reflect your grade in this class.

DISCUSSION POSTS. Readings can be found on Blackboard or elsewhere online via a link. I expect you to come to class prepared to discuss and ask questions about the readings. This means that you must read all assigned readings prior to the date listed on the syllabus. Each week, I will post a discussion prompt on Blackboard on Monday morning. These prompts may ask you to reflect on some aspect of our weekly course materials, draw on your own personal experiences, or a combination of both. For full credit, you must respond to this prompt by Wednesday evening at 8:00pm, and comment on the post of at least one of your classmates by Friday evening at 8:00pm. Your posts should be a minimum of 2 to 3 paragraphs in length each week. I will email you with an "in-progress" grade of these posts with feedback at the end of our fifth week of class.

GRIMOIRE: A PERSONAL PORTFOLIO OF (O)CULTURAL ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATIONS. There are 3 short assignments that provide you with the opportunity to reflect on the role of the supernatural in your own and other people's lives and connect this to course readings. You will receive a separate handout with instructions for each component, and you will submit each of them via Blackboard.

COLLABORATIVE DIGITAL COMPENDIUM ENTRY. As a class, we will create a guide (or encyclopedia) of sorts that includes various supernatural phenomena and practices. You'll submit a proposal for your entry topic by **Week 3**. Over the course of the semester, you will create a 2-page spread in which you interpret your topic, both verbally and visually (through drawings, maps, photos, and/or other illustrations). A detailed checklist with full requirements will follow. You will submit your completed PDF via Blackboard.

QUIZZES & EXAMS. All quizzes and exams will be given on Blackboard on the dates listed in the course schedule. **Quizzes** will be mini versions of the exams, evaluating your comprehension of the course readings, films, and lectures, while also giving you practice for the midterm and final.

Quizzes, the **midterm**, and the **final** exam will consist of a combination of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer, and essay questions. You must be prepared to demonstrate an understanding of the terms and concepts as they relate to the readings, class discussions, films, and other course activities. This means that to do well on these exams, you must attend class and keep up with the readings, films, lectures/discussions, and all other aspects of this course. The final exam will be cumulative.

GRADING SCALE

A	100-90%	B	89-80%	C	79-70%	D	69-60%	F	59-0%
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"Folklore, let me tell you, is one of the most dangerous words in the English language."
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, quoting Comaroff in "Folklore's Crisis"