TITLE: Uncommon Knowledge: Researching and Writing Nerd Novels

DESCRIPTION: Fiction writers work from a mix of imagination, observed realities, inherited stories, and common knowledge—but some novels are propelled by *uncommon* knowledge. When a character's professional expertise is pivotal to her identity, or a plot or theme relies on complex concepts and obscure facts—whether in physics or clinical psychology, Shakespeare studies or chemistry, birdwatching or airport security—research is crucial. How can we use it to bring our nerdy narrative visions to life?

CATEGORY: Fiction Craft and Criticism

PARTICIPANTS
Susan M. Gaines (organizer/moderator).
Susan M. Gaines is the author of the novels *Accidentals* and *Carbon Dreams,* as well as the science narrative *Echoes of Life*. Her stories have appeared in the *North American Review, Missouri Review, Best of the West,* and other anthologies, and been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. She is founding director of the Fiction Meets Science Program at the University of Bremen in Germany.
http://susanmgaines.com

Jean Hegland
Jean Hegland's first novel, *Into the Forest*, has been translated into seventeen languages and adapted as a Canadian film (starring Ellen Page and Evan Rachel Wood) and a French graphic novel. Her third and most recent novel, *Still Time*, is about an aging Shakespeare scholar's final encounters with the plays.
http://jean-hegland.com/

Christian Kiefer
Christian Kiefer is the author of the novels *Phantoms, The Animals,* and *The Infinite Tides,* among other works of fiction and poetry. He holds a PhD in English literature and is the director of Ashland University's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

Ellen Meeropol
Ellen Meeropol is the author of four novels: Her Sister's Tattoo, Kinship of Clover, On Hurricane Island, and House Arrest. Recent and forthcoming essay and story publications include Lit Hub, Solstice, Lilith, Ms. Magazine, The Boston Globe, and The Writers Chronicle. Ellen is a founding member of Straw Dog Writers Guild and leads their Social Justice Writing Project. www.ellenmeeropol.com

Original panel members, who contributed to the development of our thoughts for this discussion, but could not attend.

Edward Schwarzschild
Edward Schwarzschild's books include *Responsible Men, The Family Diamond*, and the forthcoming novel, *In Security*, which follows the life of a TSA officer. Schwarzschild is Director of Creative Writing at the University at Albany, SUNY and a Fellow of the New York State Writers Institute.
http://edwardschwarzschild.com/

Catherine Bush
Catherine Bush is the author of the forthcoming novel, *Blaze Island*, as well as four other novels, including *The Rules of Engagement*, chosen as a New York Times Notable Book. She is Associate Professor at the University of Guelph and Coordinator of the Guelph Creative Writing MFA located in Toronto.
http://catherinebush.com/

Padma Viswanathan
Padma Viswanathan's novels, *The Toss of a Lemon* and *The Ever After of Ashwin Rao*, have been published in eight countries. Her translation of *St. Bernardo*, a novel by Graciliano Ramos, will be released by NYRB in April, 2020. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville.
http://padmaviswanathan.com/

INTRODUCTION
Susan M. Gaines (organizer/moderator)
Susan will introduce the panel, talking briefly about when and why we incorporate forms of formal or professional knowledge in our fiction, with examples of well-known works that *depend* on such knowledge to such an extent that she and Jean have affectionately christened them "nerd novels." She will introduce the other panel members, noting why she asked them to join in this discussion.

DISCUSSION
Panelists will briefly summarize the roles that specialized or "uncommon" knowledge has played in their "nerdiest" works or in novels they have taught or admired, and then address the following questions.

How do we become experts on the subjects of our books?
 To what extent do we use first-hand (eg personal experience/education), second hand (interviews/tours/etc with practitioners) and third hand (journalistic accounts

in news, blog, book etc form) knowledge? What problems do we encounter with obtaining, understanding and using these different forms of knowledge? Panelists can provide specific examples from their own and other novels.

At what stages during the writing process do we do most of our research? (eg. before first draft, during multiple drafts, etc). How does our research affect plotting and character development?

How do we incorporate our research?

> How do we "teach" the facts, information, and ways of thinking that readers need to know to understand the novel? How can we include information that enhances the reading experience for expert or more engaged readers without turning off novice or impatient readers? How do we avoid the "information dump?" How much is enough, how much is too much? How do we decide when the knowledge is doing its job in the novel, and when it is getting in the way?

Does "accuracy" count in a work of fiction?

> How do we decide when to use actual facts, and when do we want to reshape those facts to tell our stories? How do we negotiate the wavery line between fact and fiction? How does each novel generate its rules for fictionalizing facts, and how do we communicate those rules to readers? How do we keep readers apprised of what parts of our stories are "real" and what bits are made up--and should we even bother?

On revision:

> Do we use different kinds of readers during our drafting or revision process? What is different about working on fiction that contains a lot of specialized knowledge?

Any special advice? Mistakes we've made, or seen others make, things to avoid?

AUDIENCE QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, AND DISCUSSION