NOTE: We may update and refine our discussion questions as we progress in planning, in which case we will revise this document in February.

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

Edward Schwarzschild (moderator)
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/

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 most recent novel, Still Time, is about an aging Shakespeare scholar's final encounters with the plays.
http://jean-hegland.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/](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, was published by NYRB in 2019. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville. [http://padmaviswanathan.com/](http://padmaviswanathan.com/)

INTRODUCTION
Susan M. Gaines (organizer)
Susan will talk briefly about when and why we might incorporate forms of formal or professional knowledge in our fiction, and give a few examples of well-known works that depend on such knowledge to the extent that she and Jean Hegland have affectionately christened them “nerd novels.” She will then introduce the other panel members, noting why she asked them to join in this conversation, and turn the discussion over to Ed. One slide and a list of nerd novel titles will be available as hand outs.

DISCUSSION
Edward Schwarzschild (moderator)
Ed will ask each of the panelists to briefly summarize the roles that specialized knowledge has played in their own work or in novels they have taught or admired. He will then moderate and participate in a discussion that addresses the following questions:

How do we become experts on the subjects of our books? To what extent do we use first-hand (e.g., 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 will provide some specific examples from the writing of 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 have 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?

How do we, as readers, engage with the specialized knowledge in a novel, and how do we hope and expect our readers to engage with the knowledge in our own books? We’ll give examples from our reading and teaching.

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? Is this different when we are working on fiction that contains a lot of uncommon knowledge?

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

**AUDIENCE QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, AND DISCUSSION**