Speculative storytelling, real science: How speculative fiction can help educate people on the value of science and raise awareness about the global challenges we face

Speculative fiction authors ask detailed “what-if” questions, then predicate their stories on the idea that those creative “what-ifs?” are, in fact, true. Asked properly, these fictional questions can help us explore our human condition, from the unexpected consequences of modern technology to ways in which we can better live together in our ecosystem. Using examples from his marine biology-focused debut novel, The Mountain in the Sea, Ray Nayler will discuss how he used a “what-if” question—“what if another species on earth, the octopus, gained the ability to communicate using symbols, the way humans do”—to turn a lens on human consciousness, corporate greed, climate change, the overexploitation of earth’s resources—and, finally, on our human capacity for empathy.

Born in Quebec and raised in California, Ray lived and worked abroad for two decades in Russia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Vietnam, and Kosovo. Currently a Foreign Service Officer, Ray previously worked in international educational development and served in the Peace Corps in Turkmenistan. In Vietnam, he was Environment, Science, Technology, and Health Officer at the U.S. consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. Ray also served as the international advisor to the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries at NOAA. He holds an MA in Global Diplomacy from the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at SOAS, the University of London.

Ray Nayler is the author of the critically acclaimed, Locus Award winning novel, The Mountain in the Sea, which was a finalist for the Nebula Award and for the LA Times Book Awards’ Ray Bradbury Award for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Speculative Fiction. Ray’s second book, the novella The Tusks of Extinction was published in January 2024 by Tordotcom.

Seminars will be recorded and uploaded to the SAFS Youtube at www.youtube.com/@UWSAFS

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