

## Jack London's Wolves, Dogs, and Humans



Midcoast Senior College, Fall 2025 (Term II)  
Cheryl and John Swift, Instructors

**The Class:** This course uses an interdisciplinary approach to examine Jack London's representations of animal evolution, heredity, and behavior in his famous Klondike novels, *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906). A colorful adventurer himself, London wrote best selling adventure stories; he was also a student of evolutionary theory and its many variants in nineteenth century European/American scientific, political, and social thought. In these two wolf/dog novels he illustrated vividly his own ideas about evolution while exploring human tensions and pathways between the wild and the tame, the natural and the social, the primordial and the modern.

**Instructors:** Cheryl taught Biology and Environmental Science at Whittier College in Whittier, California; John taught English and American Studies at Occidental College in Los Angeles. They've collaborated for many years on projects at the intersections of biology and literary studies. Cheryl is also an amateur dog breeder and trainer, and an AKC-certified judge for hunt tests.

### Meeting Time

**and Place:** Tuesdays 3-4:30 p.m. (9/23-10/28) in the Merrymeeting Room at Thornton Oaks in Brunswick.

**Texts:** Both novels are in the public domain and available in many inexpensive editions, including free e-books. We recommend Jack London, *The Call of the Wild, White Fang, and other Stories* (Penguin Classics: ISBN 0140186512), which is inexpensive at Amazon and reasonably well-edited, but any edition is suitable for the course. We ask that members bring copies of the novel under discussion to class meetings. We will also prepare other short readings, including basic readings in evolution and animal behavior, some early 20th century nature writing, and at least one of London's short non-fiction essays. These will be made available through the course website or email. We'll read and discuss the works as described in the schedule in the next section. We encourage you to read ahead.

## Schedule of Readings and Discussions:

**Overview:** The first day of class (9/23) will be devoted to introductions: to one another, to this syllabus, to Jack London and his work, to some of the basic science concepts that we'll be using. We ask that you read two short pieces for discussion in class; there are clickable links to them below, and we'll try to post them on the course website also.

We'll talk about *The Call of the Wild* directly on the second class day, 9/30, and move to *White Fang* for the meetings of 10/7 and 10/14. (The number of pages in the schedule below refer to the Penguin edition.) Again we include some links to shorter pieces that may be useful in thinking about the novels.

The final two meetings – 10/21 and 10/28 – will give us a chance to reframe the two novels in the contexts of ideas about animals and their behaviors in the early 20th century and in the present. Once more, there are links to short background materials.

## Daily Schedule:

- September 23:       **Introduction(s)**  
Introduction to Jack London, dogs, wolves, and science  
Reading: London, "[Diable](#)" (10 pages); Morell, "[How Wolf Became Dog](#)" (10 pages)
- September 30:       **Into the Wild**  
Reading: *The Call of the Wild* (86 pages); Kipling, "[The Law of the Jungle](#)" (poem)
- October 7:           **Return to the Tame I**  
Reading: *White Fang* (Parts I-III) (111 pages)
- October 14 :         **Return to the Tame 2**  
Reading: *White Fang* (Parts IV-V) (87 pages); "[The Law of the Household in Albert Payson Terhune's \*Lad: a Dog\*](#)" (2 pages)
- October 21:         **London and Nature**  
Reading: Edward B. Clark, "[Roosevelt on the Nature Fakers](#)" (5 pages); London, "[The Other Animals](#)" (13 pages); [Cartoon](#) accompanying "The Other Animals" in *Collier's* 9/5/1908; William Hornaday, selections from [The American Natural History](#) (5 pages); Worring, "[Wolves in the Human Imagination](#)"; Bromley, "[Do Our Dogs Have Something to Tell the World?](#)" (16 pages)

October 28:

**London and Science – and the modern reader (us)**

Reading: Marshall-Pescini et al., "[Social Ecology of Dogs and Wolves](#)" (7 pages)

**Further Readings on Dog Evolution:**

These links are to more scientific articles about the evolution of dogs. They may be of interest to members of the class who want to know more about current research, and Cheryl may refer to them and other articles in class. We may add more online materials that explore questions that arise during the course.

Burrows A., Smith, L., et al., "[Evolutionary divergence of facial muscle physiology between domestic dogs and wolves](#)." (9 pages)

Lehoczki, F., Andics, A., Kershenbaum, A. et al. "[Genetic distance from wolves affects family dogs' reactions towards howls](#)." (10 pages)

Range, F., et al. "[Comparing wolves and dogs: current status and implications for human 'self-domestication'](#)." (13 pages)

Wynne, Clive. "[The Indispensable Dog](#)." (11 pages)