

Readercon 26



27 READERCON



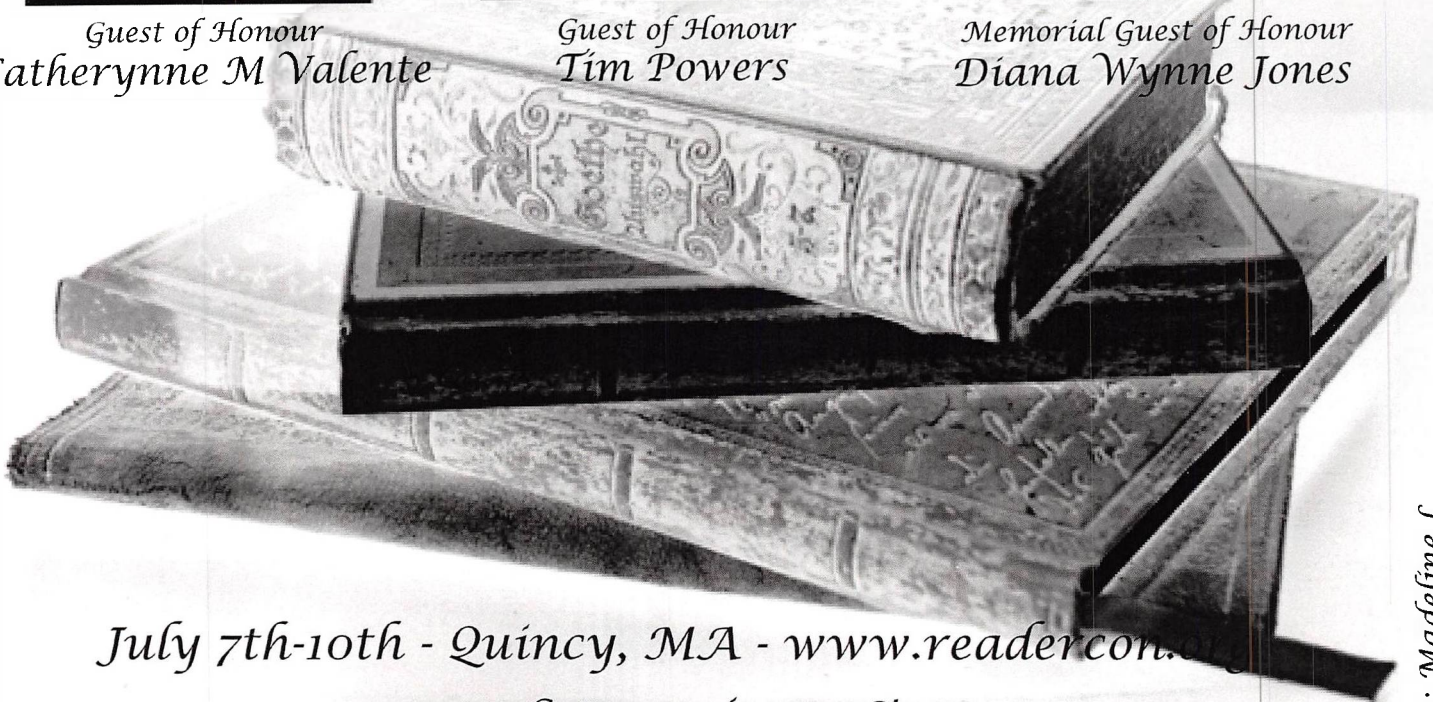
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READERCON 26 SOUVENIR BOOK

JULY 9-12, 2015

GUESTS OF HONOR:

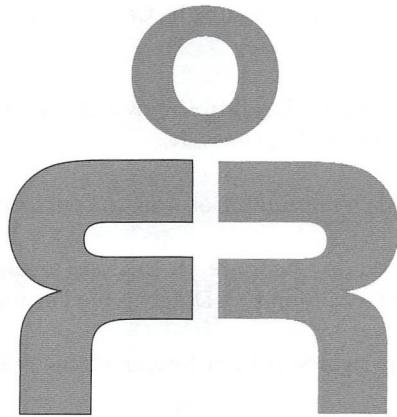
*Nicola Griffith
&
Gary K. Wolfe*

MEMORIAL GUEST OF HONOR:

Joanna Russ

2014 CORDWAINER SMITH AWARD WINNER:

Mildred Clingerman



NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to Readercon 26! This year's issue was brought to you by a rag-tag team of volunteers; some new faces, some old. There's a great crop of living and memorial Guests of Honor whose work is featured in this Souvenir Book— Gary K. Wolfe, Nicola Griffith, Joanna Russ, and Mildred Clingerman, as well a dozen or so contributions about these guests from other genre fiction authors.

With deepest pride and greatest pleasure, we welcome you to Readercon 26. Relax! Pull up a chair as the Readercon Editors present...your Souvenir Book.

(Be honest: how many of you are now humming "Be Our Guest?")

—Rachael Ferguson

Having been partially recalled, à la George Smiley, from serene Souvenir Book editorial retirement, we were certainly very pleased once again to enjoy the collegial cooperation of our wonderful Guests of Honor and the family of the Cordwainer Smith honoree. They and the other contributors to this book cannot be thanked enough for their generosity and creativity in helping Readercon celebrate this quartet of literary figures. A special note of deep appreciation goes to Nevenah Smith for producing a book at near-FTL speed, and for making it gorgeous as always.

—Richard Duffy and Ellen Brody



CREDITS

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CONTENTS

NICOLA GRIFFITH

NICOLA GRIFFITH
Malcolm Edwards 6

FOR NICOLA
Tim Powers 6

NICOLA GRIFFITH FINDS
HER PLACE
Joseph Hayes 7

AS WE MEAN TO GO ON
*Nicola Griffith and
Kelley Eskridge 9*

NICOLA GRIFFITH
BIBLIOGRAPHY
14

GARY WOLFE

GARY WOLFE:
CARTOGRAPHER
Mary Rickert 16

THE CONSIDERATOR
John Clute 17

TAGALONGS, GARY AND ME
Kit Reed 18

GARY WOLFE: THE GOOD
DOCTOR
Liz Hand 19

GARY WOLFE'S POD PEOPLE
James Morrow 20

MR. GARY, OR
CONSIDERING OUR WOLFE
Peter Straub 21

DIALOGUES WITH THE
IMPOSSIBLE (WITH SIDE
TRIPS INTO THE NOT
POSSIBLE, THE DISPOSSIBLE,
THE UNPOSSIBLE, AND THE
POSSIBLE BUT STUPID)
Gary K. Wolfe 24

GARY K. WOLFE
BIBLIOGRAPHY
29

JOANNA RUSS

EVERYONE SHOULD MEET
JOANNA RUSS
Nicola Griffith 34

JOANNA RUSS'S "ALYX"
STORIES: ADVENTURES IN
SF TRADITION
Gary K. Wolfe 35

MY HAIR STOOD ON END!
TALKING WITH JOANNA
RUSS
ABOUT SLASH,
COMMUNITY, AND FEMALE
SEXUALITY

*Interview by Consuela Francis
and Alison Piepmeier 37*

SCIENCE FICTION'S
INVISIBLE FEMALE MEN:
JOANNA RUSS'S "WHEN
IT CHANGED" AND JAMES
TIPTREE'S "THE WOMEN
MEN DON'T SEE"
Marleen S. Barr 45

JOANNA RUSS
*Interviewed by Samuel R.
Delany 48*

TOWARDS AN AESTHETIC
OF SCIENCE FICTION
Joanna Russ 52

JOANNA RUSS
BIBLIOGRAPHY
57

MILDRED CLINGERMAN

MEMORIES OF MY MOTHER
Kendall Faye Burling 61

MILDRED CLINGERMAN
Lisa Yaszek 62

MINISTER WITHOUT
PORTFOLIO
Mildred Clingerman 64

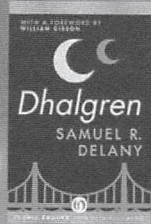
MILDRED CLINGERMAN
BIBLIOGRAPHY
66

THE READERCON COMMITTEE

CELEBRATES OUR READERCON ATTENDEES



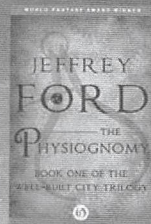
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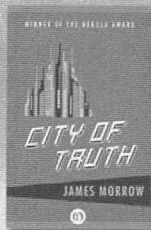
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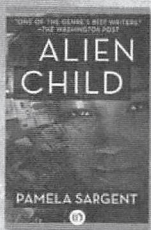
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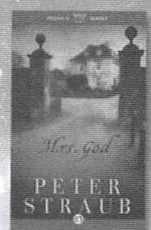
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Nicola Griffith



NICOLA GRIFFITH

Malcolm Edwards

I first became aware of Nicola when she sent me a large typescript at Gollancz in the late 1980s. It went into the slushpile, but quickly emerged as it was clear, even at a cursory glance, that she *could write* (anyone who has ever had to read a slushpile will recognize what a rare moment this is). I don't remember anything about the content, but I remember the typescript, sitting on the shelf behind my desk, whispering insistently at me while I worked on other things. Eventually I forced myself into a decision, albeit an indecisive one, and I wrote to her to say that it was interesting but much too long, and if she could cut it substantially I'd probably offer to publish it. I don't remember if she replied, but she has written about her reaction . . .

Flash forward a few years—two? five?—and I was at Grafton, then Britain's premier paperback sf imprint, and looking around for new talent. I read and enjoyed a couple of Nicola's stories in *Interzone*, and thought to myself, is this that author whose novel I didn't buy at Gollancz? I thought she was the same person, but wasn't certain enough to mention it. I guess David Pringle at *Interzone* gave me her address, and wrote to say that if she happened to be working on a novel I'd be very interested to see it. She replied pretty quickly, to say that absolutely she was in the middle of something (this, I later discovered, was untrue). One thing led to another, and the "other" was *Ammonite*. I think by that point she had acquired an agent in the US, which is a whole other story, and it was sold on both sides of the Atlantic pretty quickly.

Soon afterward, I met Nicola for the first time, and was immediately impressed (and, if I'm honest, slightly intimidated) by this feisty, fiercely intelligent, and athletic woman, who taught self-defense classes and was properly ambitious as a writer, but was hampered by chronic fatigue syndrome. A second

novel, *Slow River*, followed, but by that time my job had taken me away from sf, and I wasn't as closely involved. As you all know, it won a Nebula, adding to the Tiptree and Lambda Awards which *Ammonite* had already scored. A great career in sff seemed to beckon, but Nicola had other ideas (literally). Somewhere along the way, the fatigue syndrome was diagnosed as MS, and Nicola moved to the US to be with her partner (now wife) Kelley Eskridge. Along the way, we lost touch, but the internet happened, and so did e-books, and when Gollancz decided to launch an e-book sf library, Nicola was on my list, and we are now the happy electronic publisher of those books; she has also become one of the quartet which constitute our Advisory Board, along with Steve Baxter, Pat Cadigan and Bob Silverberg. In 2011, I went to Seattle for my son's wedding, and Nicola was the single person I knew professionally who I arranged to see. I hadn't seen her for a long time, but she was remarkably unchanged, apart from now requiring crutches because of the depredations of her condition. She remains feisty, fiercely intelligent and properly ambitious—and has (almost) returned to the fold with *Hild*, one of those novels which is fantasy if you look at it from the right angle. I can probably count on two hands the number of times we've met, but I admire her immensely, both as a writer and as a person, and I'm proud to have played a small role in launching her career. I've probably never told her so^{***}, but it's never too late.

* "Probably" might be overstating my commitment.

** I'm a wimp. Sue me.

*** I'm British. Sue me.



FOR NICOLA

Tim Powers

In 1997 a novel of mine was a Nebula Award nominee, and it didn't win—and actually I was more pleased with the result than not. The winner was Nicola Griffith, for her novel *Slow River*.

Nine years earlier I had been the first of six instructors at the Clarion workshop at Michigan State University, and Nicola was one of the students. It was my first time teaching any sort of workshop, and it was her first trip outside of the United Kingdom. I imagine both of us were acting more confident than we really felt.

But she met Kelley Eskridge there, and both of them showed every sign of becoming very good writers—and then they did, with books like *Solitaire* and *Ammonite*.

I always want to brag about "my" Clarion students, and when Nicola won the Nebula in '97 I probably said, smugly, "I taught her everything she knows!" But with *Hild* I'd better not say that anymore, since it's clear that at this point she knows more about the craft than I do! Altogether I'm happy to have met her all those years ago, and I'm glad that we've continued to be friends ever since.



NICOLA GRIFFITH FINDS HER PLACE

Joseph Hayes

[This interview first appeared at Januarymagazine.com, June 1999. Reprinted by kind permission of Joseph Hayes (www.jrhayes.net).]

When asked what kind of writer she is, Nicola Griffith responds frankly, “Determined. Convinced of my own worth.” Her work shows proof of that conviction. Her first novel, the paperback original *Ammonite* (Del Rey, 1993), won the James Tiptree Jr. and Lambda Literary Awards, and the ecologically-oriented *Slow River* (Del Rey, 1995) was winner of the 1997 Nebula Award for Best Novel and the 1996 Lambda Award. Her *Yaguara* won the 1996 Nebula for Best Novella.

A native of Leeds, England, Nicola Griffith first came to the United States in 1988 for the Clarion Workshop in Science Fiction and Fantasy. During that time she realized that as a stranger in a foreign land, she could reinvent herself without expectations. She chose instead to define who she really was.

Griffith’s latest breaks into new territory. *The Blue Place* is a taut thriller that lives up to the suspenseful promises of her previous work. Her protagonist, Aud Torvingen, is a character fully formed, and could be a product of the science-fiction genre as much as any other—a physically perfect security consultant, beautiful martial-arts expert and cobalt-hard sensualist whom the *New York Daily News* called the love child of Smilla and Nikita.

Griffith is herself a political animal. She is not enamored of labels, either of her work, or herself, and while her move from science fiction to mystery novel was dictated solely by the material, her characters walk along similar paths. The denizens of her worlds have problems,

they battle with insecurities, yet Lore Van Oester of *Slow River* is no less capable than the almost superhuman Aud Torvingen.

And like *Ammonite*’s Marghe Taishan, Griffith and her main characters have another commonality, but one she insists should not categorize the work. In an interview about the novel *Ammonite* for the radio program *Reality Break*, she said, “I’m the author, I’m a lesbian. My protagonist is a lesbian, and she has a lesbian love affair. [But] it’s no more a book about being lesbian than [William Gibson’s] *Neuromancer* is a book about coming to terms with one’s heterosexuality.”

Griffith’s award winning extends to editorial work as well. Along with Stephen Pagel, she puts together the *Bending the Landscape* anthologies—*BTL:Fantasy* (White Wolf, March 1997) won the 1997 Lambda Literary Award for Anthology Editor, and the World Fantasy Award for Best Anthology. *BTL:Science Fiction* was released in September 1998 from Overlook Press and a third edition of horror stories is in the works.

We talked recently in an online interview.

Joseph Hayes: *The Blue Place*, your latest book, is a thriller/mystery, while your first two books, *Ammonite* and *Slow River*, were science fiction. What brought you to the field?

Nicola Griffith: You mean what brought me to SF, or what brought me to mystery? The answer is pretty much the same, anyway. I started writing SF because that’s what I was reading. It seemed to be the best way to discuss the things that interested me: the way the world and the people in it work. The way systems fit together. I love having theories about things. SF seemed to be the way to go. I find “mundane” fiction often quite boring.

Do you consider *Blue Place* your “first book” in some way?

No. Yes. Well, it’s my first foray into the bigger pond outside the tiny pond of SF. In some weird way it feels like my first “grown-up” novel. Hmmn. That’s not what I mean at all How can I describe it. Okay, for one thing, it’s the first full-size hardcover. For another, I got paid real money <grin>.”

Like Aud Torvingen, your protagonist in *The Blue Place*, you are a martial arts instructor. Do the lives of your characters reflect your own life?

I think characters in fiction are a bit like characters in dreams: all aspects of oneself. The main character, Aud Torvingen, is me and not me. She’s a sort of path not taken. If what happened to her had happened to me at that age, maybe that’s how I would have turned out. She’s from three cultures. I’m only from two (that’s hard enough!) but we’re quite different in other ways. The other characters are a real mix of people I’ve seen, people I wish I’d seen, and purely invented.

You go from descriptive passages, to pages of dialogue, to jarring violent action. Where does your sense of pacing come from?

I like to keep readers interested. It’s not so much in the pacing, per se, as in keeping the reader oriented at all times, letting her or him know where they are, exactly. Sometimes I do that with sensory detail—smell, sound, taste, texture, sometimes with dialogue ... so we can see the characters interacting. Besides, life’s like that: no humongous descriptive passages but lots of choppy changes.

Samuel Delany says that all writing is political. What occurs first to you, the story or the politics?

Ooof. Tricky question. Let’s see, I find that parts all come to me at once. For example, with *The Blue Place*, it was a dream I had years ago. Then I found a book on Norwegian architecture then I came across the name Aud the Deepminded and I got to wondering what a woman like Aud the Deepminded would have been like (she was from 9th C. Norway)—and gender politics were quite different back then.

I find that you write more about people than politics ... to me, anyway.

Yes, but people are, of course, political animals. What we do affects everyone and everything around us.

How prevalent is political correctness now in fiction?

It’s not, at least not in my work. I think that in genres just starting out like “lesbian fiction” and, oh, “disability fic-

tion” authors are a wee bit oversensitive still.

How much feedback do you get to the gender issues in your work?

Funnily enough, not much with this one. With *Ammonite* and *Slow River* it was a different kettle of fish.

Really is the SF community less tolerant?

No, it’s just that they all had to comment on the fact that I seemed to believe that the future would be chock full of dykes whereas with the more mainstream *TBP* reviewers/critics/readers seem to understand that I’m trying to create a particular narrative space with the way my characters do not comment on sexuality.

Are writers just writers, or are men’s voices different fundamentally?

I think one’s voice has to do with one’s experience. Some men have experiences similar to some women. Some women have experiences similar to some men. I don’t think it’s biologically programmed, but I do think one’s propensity towards certain things in life *is*. But there’s huge overlap, therefore I don’t think you could say there’s such a thing as a “man’s” voice or a “woman’s.” Remember James Tiptree ...

Aud, and Lore [from *Slow River*] cope with their particular demons in their own ways. What are your demons?

I suppose my real demon is worrying ...

About ...

About being ignored, or being stupid. Being less in some way, I suppose.

And is that from your own experience?

No. The opposite, I think. I was one of those really irritating kids at school who was good at everything. I could do gym and sing and was academic and the sports captain (I’m sure I was insufferable) except I was always convinced that something would happen to take it away. And in a way it has: I was diagnosed with MS five years ago. So in some ways I *am* less now, certainly from a physical viewpoint. And I worry that my brain will slowly rot. But it seems okay so far.

The depth of knowledge in your work is quite impressive. Are you a research fiend?

Thanks. Yes and no. I like to read at random, sometimes. This means I know all sorts of irrelevant things, some of which are actually useful, most of which isn’t. Then when I find I need to know something for a novel, I go off and read. But I get bored and restless pretty easily so I tend to research, and then just make stuff up <grin>.

You have strong feelings about the editing process.

I’ve been lucky. My editors have sent me a sheet or two of paper with things like: add a comma to this sentence, and I write back and say: No.

That’s lucky? Do you ever listen to their suggestions?

Yes. I always listen. When I turned in *The Blue Place*, for example, it was suggested to me that I 1) change the ending and 2) add a wee bit more menace to the Norway section. I agreed to 2) because my editor was absolutely right. I spat upon suggestion 1) from a great height because in my opinion it would have ruined the book. I’m an editor, though, as well as a writer, and I sometimes ask for sweeping rewrites. I sometimes get them, sometimes not.

What about editing your own work?

Ah, that’s different. When I was writing *Slow River* I wrote 35,000 words then threw them all away because they were rubbish. Then I wrote them again. Then again. And so on. Until I was happy. I’m very finicky.

How hard was it to find a publishing house for your first novel?

Well, my first novel, *Ammonite*, was—and I hesitate to say this because it sounds so unlikely—actually asked for by the publishing director of HarperCollins. I’d published three short stories in an English magazine called *Interzone* and he’d noticed them. He wrote me a letter asking me if I was writing a novel. I said, yep, I’m writing two (a lie) and sent him a paragraph description about both. He wrote back and said: When can I have them? I sat down and wrote *Ammonite*. Wow. I grinned for a year. Finding an

American publisher was different. I had a few wrangles before Del Rey took me on. I was very, very lucky but you know what they say: “luck is an opportunity well taken.”

What are you working on now? What’s next?

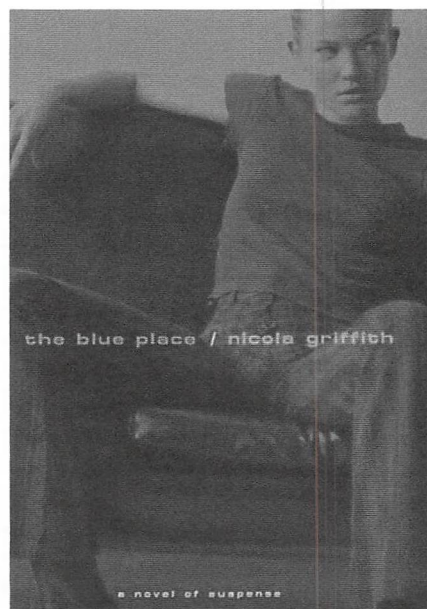
I’m working on the second Aud book. The working title is *Red Raw*. Aud is half way up a mountain, building a house with her bare hands, and crazy as a loon.

The Blue Place would make a great movie ... any bites?

No. I think it would be a good film, too, but who would play Aud? Aud would become a straight girl.

Any encouraging words for your fellow writers?

Enjoy it—there’s no point if you don’t because we certainly don’t get paid enough! But the best way to approach writing, I think, is to just ... do the work. Writing is a hard job. Pains should be taken to get it right. Do the Work.



AS WE MEAN TO GO ON

Nicola Griffith and
Kelley Eskridge

[This essay was originally published in *Bookmark Now*, Kevin Smokler, editor; Basic Books, 2005. Also currently available on both of the authors' websites.]

Kelley

I don't know how to begin this damn thing, I say. She grins and answers, *Honey, don't fuff about. Just tell the story.*

Eight words might not seem like much to run with, but they are all I need, coming from the one who knows my work as well as she knows my body, and who for seventeen years has touched both with grace, with skill, with good intent, with passionate curiosity, with fierce intelligence, with love. After more than six thousand days of living, writing, and talking about it all, I can unpack those eight words automatically; and over a third glass of iced tea I've written this in place of the highfalutin' designed-to-impress opening I had. I find this more clear and honest, much as I find myself after seventeen years with her. It's what we do: we make each other better.

The English say, *Start as you mean to go on*, so perhaps it's luck we met at a writing workshop. People warned me these workshops were rough: if I showed weakness of words, of confidence, of self, the other students would bring out the long knives and leave me collecting the leftovers of myself and my precious work in a bucket. But for me, the chance to spend six weeks in the company of students and professionals was like the scene in C.S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*, where the boy Digory stands in front of the bell and the plaque that says "Make your choice, Adventurous Stranger/Strike the bell and bide the danger/Or wonder, till it drives you mad/What would have followed if you had." I've typed all that from memory because it burned into my adolescent brain the first time I read it, so many years ago, when I understood that I would be faced with such choices in my life: that I would have to draw back, or reach out and grab. That's what the workshop felt like. So I quit my job and got a loan, and drove from Georgia to Michigan with a left ankle sprained blood-black, bandaged rigid so I could work the clutch pedal with my heel. I was scared witless: of debt, of writing, of not writing. Of those knives. Of finding myself too fucked up to create work that connects rather than distances, and having to go back home with a withered dream, a longed-for identity popped like a balloon.

And then came Nicola. The first time I saw her, in the hallway of the unairconditioned dorm, close and hot as a greenhouse, I opened my mouth to say *How was your trip?* as

if we were already each other's friend, lover, partner, joint explorer. I knew in our first three sentences that she would be the best writer there; that I would help her be better; that all my assumptions about how my life would unfurl were wrong; and that I would someday be the writer I yearned to be, because she wouldn't have it any other way.

Sometimes people think it couldn't have been that sudden, that this is just a story we tell. And it is—the first story of us—but it also happened, and is happening still.

Nicola

Books—the ones Kelley and I had read, the ones we wanted to write—drew us to the place where we would meet, and made it possible for us to understand each other when we got there. We were born only nine days apart, but also eight thousand miles, on different continents and to different cultures. Our meeting and life together should have been one long cultural car crash, but though there are times when our common language puzzles us extremely, books have formed for us a parallel universe, a world where we learnt the same things at the same time from the same characters, though sometimes with distinctly different flavours.

I remember that verse from *The Magician's Nephew*. Vaguely. What stuck in my mind wasn't Digory's moment of choice, but what happened next: the awakening of Jadis, the great and terrible Queen of Charn, in all her six-foot tall, bare-armed, knife-wielding glory. She immediately became both an eroticised image—like the eponymous magician, part of me sat up straight and thought, "dem fine woman ... spirited gel"—and a facet of my self-identity. Even today I find bare arms and a desire to take over the world a reasonable response to some situations. And, oh, I like knives.

By the time we met, we had both read the quintessentially English C.S. Lewis, and the resolutely American Jack London. We had both read *The Lord of the Rings* and internalised it to such an extent that even from that first day we could quote it wryly ("It isn't natural, and trouble will come of it!") and understand a variety of meanings, heartfelt and ironic, wistful and smug, depending on context. We were connected by story; we came together in that space where character and plot illuminate and influence each other, much as Kelley and I do.

I have fallen in love with Kelley many times—watching her eat fried chicken with her hands, watching her cry at some sentimental film, the first moment I saw her limping down the corridor on crutches in 98-degree heat—but the third or fourth time was about a week into the workshop when we were driving to a bookstore for a reading. Kelley was behind the wheel of her smart red Toyota SR5. A stoplight was lasting a long time, and she shifted impatiently and said, "*Jan jan jan*," a command and an invocation from Frank Herbert meaning "Go! Go! Go!" and I had come home. I knew that she, too, had sat curled up on the floor of her bedroom as a teenager, reading about St. Alia of the Knife learning to slow her breathing and move her consciousness through time; she too had paused and tried to move a muscle beside her nose or imagined fighting an automaton stark naked in the moonlight. In that moment I knew so much about her it was like swallowing the world.

Kelley

So how could we not be together? We make story, it makes us. Like the Worm Ouroboros, swallowing bits of ourselves, bringing it all back up again. I've always disliked the pictures that show the Worm lying still, looking vaguely pissed: I prefer to imagine it giving itself a push and rolling exuberantly out of frame. Hooping it up. Off to eat ice cream or go dancing, and tell a good story when it comes home.

It's a human thing to tell stories about how we've become ourselves, to put experience into an ongoing context, so that *here's what happened* becomes *here is who I am*. That's what Nicola and I did when we met. Then we spent a year apart, she in England and I in Georgia, courting by mail. We always make a point of telling people this was before email, so the listener understands it was a serious business, involving much hand-cramping—twelve months and a quarter million words of everyday details, philosophical musings, personal history, dreams, hopes, fears.

Seventeen years later, our lives are webbed, hyperlinked by shared experience, woven into an ongoing conversation of our selves and the two great bindings between us: our love and our work.

What's it like living with another writer, people ask. That's a large question. Inside it, some people pack their need for our life to be the stuff of their dreams, storybook-perfect, magic instead of sweat. Others are looking for confirmation that one of us is the Real Writer and the other is Mrs. Real Writer. It's a basic cultural assumption: someone leads, someone follows; one shines, the other smiles bravely and makes tea. And there's the occasional truly nasty questioner who can't quite hide the hope that writing and love are two horses fighting in harness, pulling in opposite directions, that our work is the slow bullet in the brain of our relationship. *Don't you ever worry that she'll be more successful? I mean ...* Yes, sunshine, we know what you mean. Fuck you.

I know, I know: it's a fair question, if fairly asked. But that negative baseline enrages me, the default assumption that people aren't capable of living joyfully with ambiguity. What a stupid story that would be. As with all life-altering moments—love, sex, dying, failure, success—the more interesting question is, how do you do it?

For one thing, we talk. A lot. Elephants don't loom long in our living room: we can't afford to tiptoe around the hard things, because there are too many of them. We talked through the publication of her first three novels, when I was struggling to get a hundred words a week on paper, and felt left behind and frightened to my core. We talked through the short fiction contest we both entered where I won the eleven thousand dollar first prize, and she didn't place. We've articulated our agreement that we are each the Real Writer (we feel about writing space the way we feel about everything we own: it's 100% hers and 100% mine, none of that 50/50 nonsense. Why would we settle for half the space?) She's won a dozen national and international writing awards. I've been shortlisted for a half-dozen and never won. *Publisher's Weekly* loves her work and hates mine, but my first novel was a *New York Times* Notable Book. And so on. The truth is, few people would find any meaningful comparison in our careers, or our work, if we didn't rub up

against each other in daily life. Proximity and its cousin, influence, turn us from purely individual writers into something else. We mAP: a jointly-traveled internal landscape. We have different process and voice, similar definitions of good writing, sometimes-overlapping concerns, and a root system of shared influences.

And we have an identical determination to write stories that touch people, transport them, bring them closer to themselves. So what we do, besides talk, is help each other make that happen.

Nicola

The single most important thing we do is tell each other the truth, because writers can't always be trusted to do that for themselves.

Writing is a rush. It's blindingly, incurably addictive. I will do almost anything to dive and swim in that gushing word stream. When the sentences purl forth, when I can do no wordly wrong, it's like being god, or that moment in sex when you step from the rolling hills of hunger onto the vast plain of orgasm, knowing that nothing can stop you now.

So I turn on my music, and I start writing, and I'm lost—Oh, I think, that phrase is so sharp it'll take their fingers off—and then I start wriggling uncomfortably in my chair: Yes, but would that character really do that? Oh, yep, it's all very cool and exciting, but, really, would she *do* that?

And, like all addicts, I lie to myself, just to ride the high a little longer. Yes, yes, I say, it's fine, don't worry, just keep going. You can make it look right later. And I can. Like all expert writers, I can spin enough gorgeous sentences and narrative drive to paper over any crack and make the story look good. The crack will still be there, though; on some level, the story won't be true.

True fiction rings pure and clear when you flick it, like a crystal wine glass. If it's flawed, it doesn't matter how good it looks, it doesn't matter whether the prose gleams or the metaphors are as perfect as circles: when you flick it you get nothing but a dull buzz.

Fiction writers churn out flawed story all the time. We lie to ourselves about the essential viability of the work, and then fake it with consummate skill. These cracked works might look good, they might win awards or go on to bestsellerdom, but they are still broken.

So Kelley flicks the novel or the story and tells me what she hears. Most of the time, what I give her rings true but could be improved: word choice, metaphor system, character motivation, sentence structure, pacing and so on. She tells me so. Naturally, I hate that; there are times when I could cheerfully throw her in a tree chipper.

When we were first living together, and I was writing *Ammonite*, I was so grumpy about her comments that she would leave the marked-up manuscript on the dining table and flee to work. For the next nine hours I'd swear, kick furniture, and walk five times around the lake venting my spleen at squirrels and frogs and dragonflies, so that by the time she got home, I could say, *You know, you might be right about that part, with the thing. This nifty little sentence, though, I don't understand why you don't think that works.* And then we would talk.

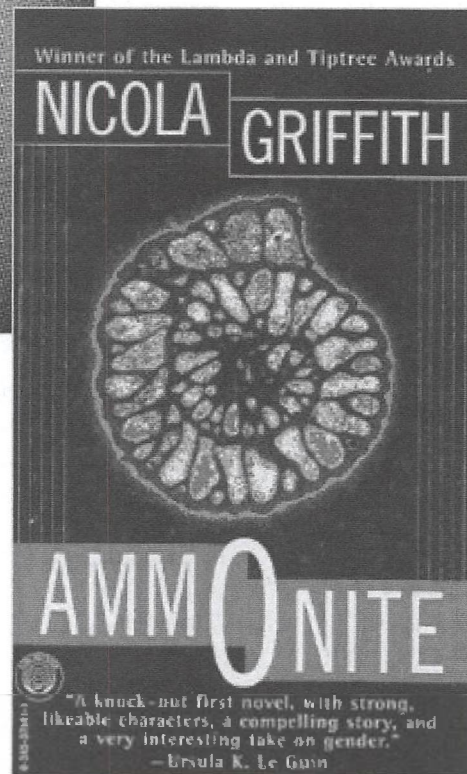
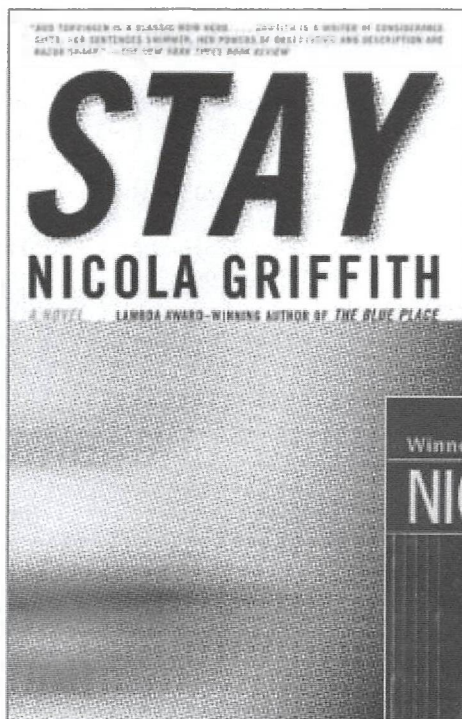
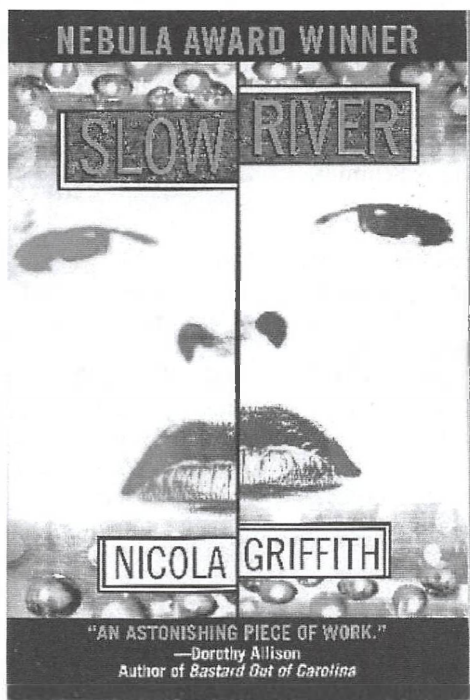
using only my own internal compass and long conversations with Kelley—because there were no guidebooks about this stuff, it's too new. How honest should one be? How guarded? What do my readers deserve to know? What do I want to tell them?

The Kelley and Nicola you meet via Virtual Pint and Ask Nicola are not quite the same Kelley and Nicola you might meet at a party, but if you'd read even a handful of our answers, you would easily connect the person with her text. I'm sure that shocks no one. What shocks me—despite experiencing it with Kelley on a daily basis for the last seventeen years—is the extent to which answering truthfully questions about my work influences that work. For example, a couple of years ago a reader wrote in and asked me about the role of music in *Stay* and *The Blue Place*, and the stance from which the narrator, Aud, thinks about music. I didn't know the answer; I'd never even thought about it. I said so. But I knew that was the easy way out. So I promised the reader I would think about it, and I did: while brushing my teeth, while stroking the cat, while chopping vegetables. And I was amazed at how little I knew about Aud, and

this realisation led to discussions with the reader (it turns out she's a composer), which led to several scenes in my new novel where we learn more of Aud's past, her relationship with her mother and her attitude to the world—all through her interaction with two different pieces of music. All because of that initial question and the train of thought triggered by trying to answer it truthfully.

What this reader did with a query about my work, Kelley and I do for each other every day. We reflect and illuminate, we ask the hard questions of each other and expect deep, considered answers. Asking and answering changes everything.

Meeting Kelley changed everything. I felt it, the first time I saw her. There she was, limping down that corridor—I could barely breathe it was so hot; the air was like warm potato soup—and I saw her and thought, Oh. Every single cell in my body lined up like iron filings and pointed at her. She is my magnet. And she is my book. I read her over and over



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Compiled by Ellen Brody & Richard Duffy

[Only includes first publications]

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1993 Won James Tiptree Jr. Award, for *Ammonite*

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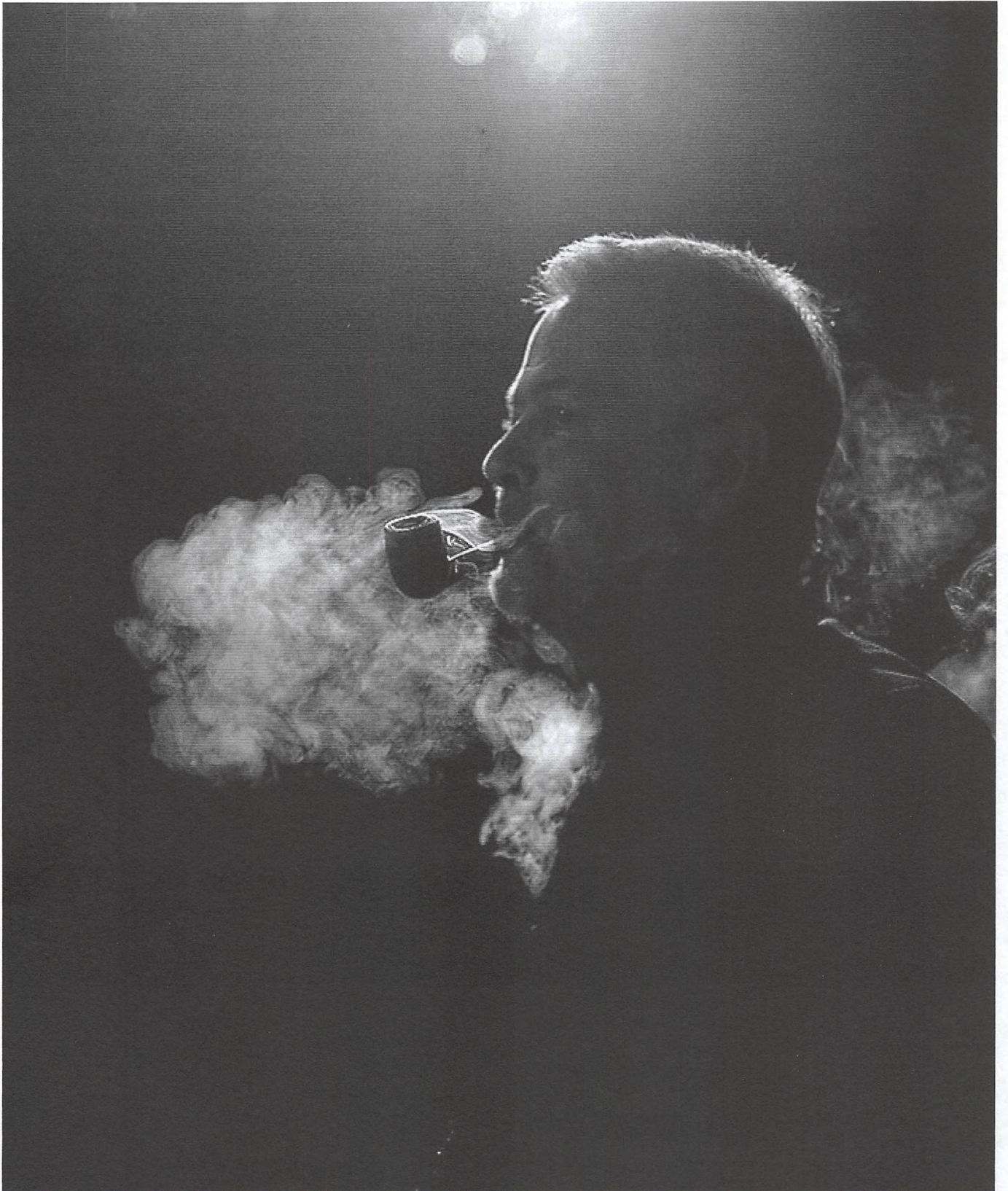
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2014 Won Washington State Book Award, for *Hild*



Gary K. Wolfe

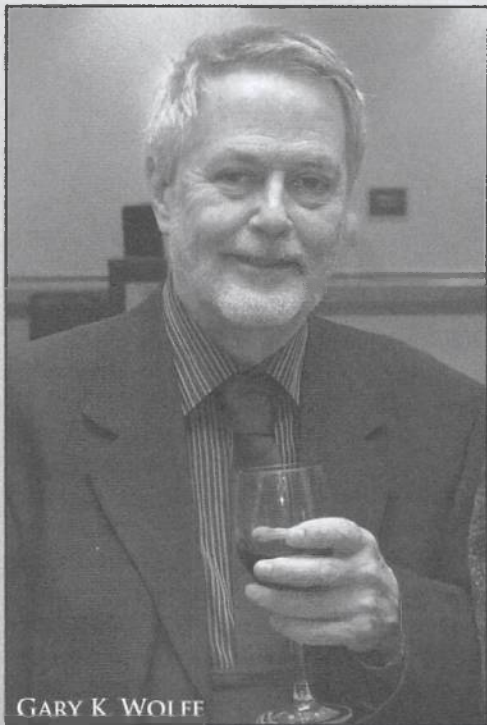


GARY WOLFE: CARTOGRAPHER

*An Appreciation by
Mary Rickert*

What I tell my writing students is that every story should contain within its own borders the information needed to understand it. In other words, every fiction creates its own geography.

Within this elegant arrangement rests the great opportunity of fiction to engage with the large world. Everything that can be learned about reading and writing can be found in a Wolfe review. He draws, with precision, beautiful maps. His knowledge of the universe within which these maps are drawn is so vast that he is also able to reveal connections and patterns not readily apparent to the novice. He makes this look easy but as anyone who has tried to write reviews knows, it is not, which is why so many veer off course into territory of personal revelation sourced in life experience or political leanings that lead us to the dark edge; that way "there be dragons" as they used to say. I am proud to be a part of a community that recognizes the value of a well drawn critique. We are so very fortunate to have Gary Wolfe as our celestial cartographer.



GARY K. WOLFE

LOCUS

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THE CONSIDERATOR

John Clute

1
The very first gaze that ever Gary K Wolfe gave me was considering. This was 1994. Anna Russell and I'd been at Readercon, which was still in Worcester, and which we'd been having fun at, but had to break off on Friday and fly to Arlington Park, just north of Chicago, where the SFRA Conference for that year had begun to verge as close to yippee as it was going to get, and where I was due to give a thank you speech for the Pilgrim I was going to be the 25th awardee of. I noticed a handsome couple across the crowded banquet table piled high with fodder; they both seemed to be paying more attention to the world than to the plates before them. I spoke for a bit, and noticed that the guy seemed to be clocking what I was contriving to say. Why, I thought, is that grave-faced man with an almost compassionate smile and a decorous beard clocking this guff? Only later did I work out that I'd almost met Gary Wolfe and Dede Weil, and that he had been writing in his head a Locus conference report for Charlie Brown: that he had been considering me. "Clute spoke somewhat nostalgically," he later successfully said.

I have always liked the somewhat. I would soon learn, of course, that Gary never uttered and would never write anything without conveying a sense that a truth about something that mattered had been deposed with justice. It took a year to meet him. I was in Chicago, pushing a book. *Dorling Kindersley* (which had not yet committed suicide) arranged a meeting for us somewhere underground to do a radio interview. Memory tells me we met in a heartwood chamber leitmotified like an orrery somewhere hundreds of feet beneath the Vertical Mosaic of the Chicago Tribune tower; but this was not so. What memory wants to embellish is that Gary made me feel at home. Where we really met was in a basement with sound equipment, and Dede pacing between pillars in the middle distance, in light and shadow, visible not visible, clocking the time: timing Gary. While she was alive, he always knew where he was, and when, and who, and why: because she did.

We did the interview. He had a radio voice, not the kind of a voice which owns the air (like some radio voices we have known), but one which shaped the sentences it uttered so we could join him. So we could come in. It was the voice of the man on WFMT who played classic music after midnight in 1958 into the car radio, sanctioning us the night and the morning too. I was home. I had always loved Chicago. I had always known Gary.

2

When we met in Chicago, Gary Wolfe had already begun to write the columns he has now provided monthly for Locus since 1992 (with one short break after Dede died in late 2000, leaving the world out of tune), a million or so civil sunlit words as load-bearing as coral. I've written about the Gary K Wolfe of this column before, in a piece called "What I Did on my Summer Vacation", the last version of which appeared in *Pardon This Intrusion: Fanastika in the World Storm* (2011), so I won't clone that here, or go on about the canary fever of the genuine critic sniffing out the new, which can be scalding. Suffice it to say that these 270 or so Locus columns, some of considerable length, constitute in their adamantly text-focused cognitive drive the most sustained on-the-spot chronicle of any field of literature I can think of. Three volumes—*Soundings: Reviews 1992-1996* (2005), *Bearings: Reviews 1997-2001* (2010) and *Sightings: Reviews 2002-2006* (2011), each more than 200,000 words long—have been assembled so far, not of course from a university press.

But it might be an idea to mention one of Gary's more "officially" published volumes, *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature* (2011), which comes complete with a non-MLA-compliant *Works Cited* section (ie one in which you can find out when a book was actually published). The amused sanity of these essays can be deceptive: because what they light they expose. I think for a writer like Gary serenity is a gyroscope: a platform he gazes upon us from. Under this mariner's gaze, we can feel a bit like fish in the aquarium, so caught in sargasso we cannot see the water, fail to notice our jaw-jaw is gill-flap. Hey guys (you can hear him saying, all the same), maybe it's about time to dress for the weather to come. Or drown, guys.

Which is to say that Gary Wolfe is not only civil but civilized. Of course to be civilized nowadays means saying terrible things.

3

Gary Wolfe comes to Readercon every year he can, considerator Odysseus debouching into surfless Marriott with a smile. He pats Argos, beams at the suitors. He talks in that radio voice he never lost which draws you in. He smokes his pipe downwind. He welcomes us as deeply as we will have the chance this year to welcome him. He will say thank you all considering.



TAGALONGS, GARY AND ME

Kit Reed

Every year when spring is just about to happen, I give Gary Wolfe a box of Girl Scout cookies, for reasons.

Understand, I can't just give him any old Girl Scout cookie. Although the Scouts offer everything from chocolate mint thins to the classic Girl Scout trefoil rendered in shortbread, for my friend the eloquent, fastidious critic, only one kind of Girl Scout cookie will do.

In case you were wondering, it's the peanut-butter and chocolate one, loosely described by the recipient when I first threatened to send a box. I have to ask a Girl Scout every time I make the purchase because I've never actually seen this cookie up close. It's called the Tagalong, and yes, since the season is over and the Girl Scouts have moved on, I just looked that up on the web because, *Ahem*. Are you listening, Gary—Gary? Although I hand-delivered your Tagalongs this year, I've never eaten one.

When I pounced on the first Girl Scout to report for duty outside the local supermarket last March, I expected to make this year's offering via USPS—a bright spot in the bitch winter from hell. Then snow buried the car again, and the Tagalongs never made it out of the house. Fine. I'd deliver them in Orlando at ICFA: nature's way of saying that eventually, even winters like that one end. I suppose we would have eaten the Tagalongs if we'd run out of food, but only after we'd gone all Donner Pass on the dog.

Still, they vanished the day before I left, and during the frantic search I thought, *Must bake cookies for Gary*.

Like a lot of people, I care about Gary that much. I read him before I knew him, impressed by the way he wrote, his close readings and his elegant prose. His sense of context. When he considers a book or a short story, he knows where it sits in history, in relationship to whichever canon. Gary reads *everything*. Our friend the critic has read more widely than most of us put together, and he remembers it all. If he raises a point about one of my novels I flinch, because I know he's right.

Better: when we finally met, I liked him on sight.

We were in London in the mid-nineties, hanging out on the Clutes' roof on one of those wonderful summer afternoons in the roof garden—great talk in the slanting sunlight, just the right thing to drink—and, as it turned out, Gary K. Wolfe, who was only a byline until we met.

There was the usual banter, there were moments of high seriousness and plunges into gossip and evil wit—and we laughed. We always laughed, but while John was downstairs scrambling for a review he'd written of my first collection ber-

zillion years ago, Gary and I bonded over Arche shoes—I wore them, his wife bought hers in Paris whereas I got discounts online—we probably talked about their good features, comparative shopping details, nothing big, but for me, it was a big moment. The connection was warm and funny and sweet.

I knew Gary was keeper. One of those friends I'm lucky to have in my life. Over time we ran into each other at Readercon—but never for long. We were glad to see each other, but we were running in opposite directions at tremendous speeds, like starships passing in the night.

Until ICFA—the crucial five days that break winter's back. Now I know. More than once, Brian Aldiss asked Joe and me to come to the conference back in the days when it was at what he grandly called "Boca Raton." We would be in Florida, but with three little kids along, and our spring break tied up with my ailing mother in St. Pete, we couldn't make it across the state.

Time passed. Kids became adults with kids of their own. Peter Straub first dangled the hook in spring of 2008, but it didn't seem real to me until late fall, when I ran into David Hartwell in Grand Central and we talked. Remember that hook—thanks Peter! David confected a plan, and he and Gary saw to it that I was invited. Joe and I made it to ICFA the following spring, and for the first time Gary and I had a chance to sit down and talk at length.

A lot of things were reaching critical mass for both of us. Gary's book *Evaporating Genres* was in production at the Wesleyan University Press; I was beginning to assemble a retrospective collection for them. By 2011, Gary's book was out, and mine was scheduled for publication in 2013.

It took me a while to get up the nerve to ask him if he'd write the introduction. I didn't, actually. There were too many stories, spanning a bunch of decades. With teaching and scholarship and reviewing he was so busy, how could I ask him to take on another job?

Confession: I asked Suzanna Tamminen, director of the Wesleyan Press, to ask Gary for me to spare us both the embarrassment when he said no. Impossible dream, but I had to try.

By the next January he was reporting back to me on how far he'd progressed through the manuscript and, happy as a kid with a great birthday present, I was all, *WOW*. By that time I'd completed the next-to-last story in the book, *The Legend of Troop 13*, the one about the feral Girl Scouts. Yep. That one. He's been getting Tagalongs from me ever since, and as he had *no idea* they were in the offing when he agreed to what is obviously a tremendous amount of work, they are my way of letting him know that I'll never forget how much this intense and intensive foray into my work—how I think and what I've been thinking over decades—means to me.

Now, many writers are generous but perfunctory; they might be happy to write a brief preface to a collection, but Gary is not that kind of writer. He's an immaculate critic, as thorough as he is intuitive. Remember his best title: *Evaporating Genres*. Perfect for me. In an early chapter that covers literary experimentation and the new flexibility in all things SF, he writes:

The fantastic genres, by virtue of the kinds of instability that I have attempted to delineate here in preliminary form, would seem to be less vulnerable to such genre-wide

implosions—perhaps better able to sustain the depredations of formula abuse and rampant commercialization, but hardly immune to the damage from those forces.... In the end, science fiction, fantasy, and horror are the genres that at their best, and by the very terms of the imaginative processes involved, transcend or supersede the old notions of genre. They are narrative modes that already have leaked into the atmosphere, that have escaped

their own worst debilitations, and that have therefore survived.

Man, you are singing my song! Well, that, and coming in from a very great distance, we may hear the voices of those lost girls singing the Girl Scout anthem.



GARY WOLFE: THE GOOD DOCTOR

Liz Hand

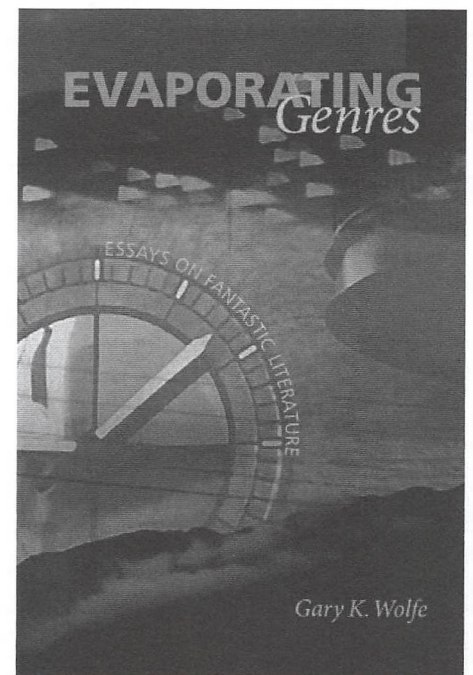
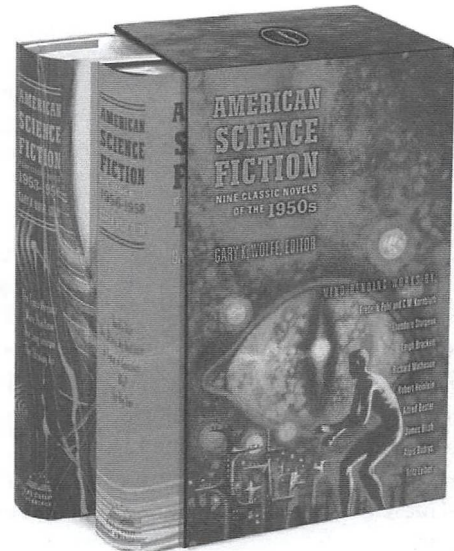
The earliest, now obsolete, usage of the word ‘critic’ refers to medicine: a critic is one who judges the severity of a disease and how best to treat it.

I can think of few better literary physicians than Gary Wolfe. He even looks like the wise doctor of our dreams—always casually though impeccably dressed, pipe in hand, with an expression that radiates a fervent intelligence combining acute interest, intense curiosity, and an undercurrent of amusement that reflects both a deep understanding and unabashed love for books and their creators.

What a writer secretly wants, even more than untold wealth and the adoration of countless readers, is for her books to be read and understood on the submolecular level—to be grokked, as we might have put it back in the day. In decades of reviewing and of writing critical essays, Gary has subjected hundreds (thousands?) of books to this kind of attention. His critical writings, collected in numerous volumes, show the extent of his knowledge not just of fantastika but of mainstream fiction, non-fiction, literary criticism, art. He has the rare gift of assessing a novel or story and imparting his conclusions—his diagnosis—in a manner that enlightens not just the work but the writer behind it.

And he possesses the even more rare gift of not alarming the patient—the writer—but of educating and, even more important, encouraging him or her to do better. After reading a review by Gary Wolfe, one strives to whip the next, flabby manuscript into shape: cut the excessive adverbs, trim that plot, limit the use of alchemical fantasy motifs to one per novel. He gives you excellent and reliable advice, even (especially) when it’s perhaps not what you want to hear. You would do well to listen to him.

In *A Fan’s Notes*, Frederick Exley writes of reading the New York Times Book Review and longing to find within its pages the ideal literary critic, someone who could be both brilliant and “fair and funny and kind.” Gary Wolfe is all of those things, and more. He is our Good Doctor, one who cares deeply about those who come under his scrutiny. We are so incredibly fortunate that he has chosen this weekend to make a house call at Readercon.



GARY WOLFE'S POD PEOPLE

James Morrow

Unless I miss my guess, this section of the Readercon 26 Souvenir Book includes pieces celebrating Gary K. Wolfe the scholar, Gary Wolfe the critic, Gary Wolfe the editor, Gary Wolfe the biographer, Gary Wolfe the educator, and Gary Wolfe the intellectual. (Here's a man who always appears to be smoking a pipe, even when he isn't.) Allow me to say a few words about a seventh persona of our co-Guest of Honor: Gary Wolfe the raconteur.

In recent months I've been interviewed by Gary not only on the *Coode Street Podcast*, which he co-hosts with Jonathan Strahan, but also in a public forum at ICFA 2015. I say "interviewed," but that isn't quite the right word, for in both cases the encounter quickly blossomed into one of those freewheeling, deuces-wild, aesthetics-obsessed conversations that we book folk are forever seeking. Through his dry wit and unassuming erudition, Gary magically transforms even the most mundane milieu into a fireside salon of the mind, complete with roaring logs, Persian rug, mulled claret, sleeping mastiff, and raging storm without.

Consider Episode 229 of the *Coode Street Podcast*, which found Gary and Jonathan engaging with William Gibson, Eileen Gunn, and Chris Brown. Early in the program Gibson corroborates Gary's intuition that the film of *Winter's Bone* was a major influence on *The Peripheral*. Gary then adds an autobiographical note.

Wolfe: My family is from ... exactly the same part of Southern Missouri [as] the guy who wrote the novel *Winter's Bone* ... I thought the film *Winter's Bone* was like a science fiction film based on my childhood, [but] I didn't know that

future was going to happen from the childhood I had. Does that make any sense?

Gibson: Yeah. Completely. I get it.

A few beats later, Gary riffs on a famous performance venue in London's Camden Town.

Wolfe: If you know what's going on at the Electric Ballroom, you aren't paying attention, because whatever's going on there is something cooler than what you know about.

Or consider Episode 218, in which Gary discusses *The Top of the Volcano: The Award-Winning Stories of Harlan Ellison*, with its author, the inimitable Harlan, and its editor, Bill Schafer of Subterranean Press. (Jonathan could not participate in this installment.)

Wolfe: I didn't give you a proper introduction, Harlan. And here's the thing. It occurred to me, when I was telling people that we were going to have you on our podcast, I think you and possibly Isaac Asimov are the only two people ever in the field who are instantly recognized by a single name. The minute I say, "Harlan's going to be on," nobody asks me, "Harlan who?" Nobody thinks it's Harlan Coben. Nobody thinks it's a coal miner.

Ellison: For my sins I am exactly who I have made myself ... The *New York Times* asked me for an eighty-year statement ... I said, "Well, after [a] career of some value, as an outsider, I have only come to the 98.2 percent conclusion that the human race was an experiment worth doing." And they said, "We can't say that."

Near the end of the conversation, Gary raises the thorny and complex question of science fiction's halting attempts over the decades to grapple with ethnic, racial, and sexual pluralism.

Wolfe: When you look at writers like C. L. Moore, who had to disguise her gender under initials when she was writing in pulp magazines ... there's clearly been an historical problem in the field in dealing with women, and people of color, and people of other ethnic origins ... Was there ever any sense of that, from being a Jewish writer in the field? Is there any history of anti-Semitism in science fiction?

Ellison: No. John Campbell had problems with Jews. But he loved Randall

Garret, and when Silverberg went in with Garrett, and they wrote together, he accepted him [Silverberg] ... There was never a problem among *writers*, whether it was a woman, whether it was Mildred Clingerman, or anyone else ... Leigh Brackett, Ed Hamilton, Bradbury, and I were a foursome. [Bradbury and I] were like their two separated children ... When Chip Delany became our friend, Chip Delany became a regular ... Where we went, they went: black, white ... male, female, gay, lesbian, homosexual, whatever. And many of the writers that we knew for decades had all of these untellable social secrets that we just didn't give out. We knew them. We didn't care.

Wolfe: So your argument is that the science fiction *writing* community was always a fairly open and tolerant community.

Ellison: Yes. It was the quality of what you did.

As the podcast winds down, Gary and Harlan continue to develop this theme, talking about Leigh Brackett's struggles with the sort of gender discrimination routinely practiced by male producers in Hollywood. Keyed to our co-GoH's probing questions, it's a dialogue well worth hearing.

To summarize: I cannot imagine having a boring exchange—casual or formal—with Gary K. Wolfe. If such an experience were possible, however, it would doubtless evoke, *mutatis mutandis*, philosopher Thomas Nagel's famous observation about sex. A bad conversation with Gary Wolfe is better than no conversation with Gary Wolfe at all.



MR. GARY, OR CONSIDERING OUR WOLFE

Peter Straub

He's an amazing guy, our Gary, but it's as if he doesn't want us to notice. He slips into a party in a crowded hotel room and greets two or three people with a belt-level flip of the hand so brief it nearly fails to register. There follows an upward movement at the corners of his mouth, not so much a smile as the earnest of a smile to appear at a later date, if you're lucky. When Gary is feeling kind of loose, the boulevardier-flâneur in him comes out, and as he issues his I.O.U. for a smile he goes so far as to tilt his head. After that he cuts through the crowd, for the moment visibly wishing he were elsewhere, and homes in on whomever he has spotted. When he gets this far, however, he almost immediately morphs into another guy entirely, an engaged and sociable character who widens his eyes to express disbelief, tilts forward to emphasize a point, gestures as though he is ironing a shirt, grins when remarking an absurdity. This man is *animated*. And right here please let me express my personal thanks to Ms. God for permitting the existence of Mr. Gary Kenilworth Wolfe (the K. being until this moment a pretty damn well closed book), whose eye for absurdity is even sharper than mine. Of course, I don't get out of the house much, and G. Kenilworth has spent most of his life immersed in the Kremlin-like politics of academe.

Gary's long career at Roosevelt University doesn't have much to do with the reasons he is being honored at Readercon, but neither is it completely irrelevant here. Consider this for a moment: Gary earned tenure, has been the Chairman of the Liberal Arts Department, and at times of crisis, when the university actually needed his help, served eight years as Dean of University College, then a bit later two as Dean of Graduate Studies. Being a Dean sounds pretty cool, and as a title it exudes a certain smooth variety of power, but I think the reality involves endless meetings, exhausting administrative tasks, constant bickering, and people begging for money. In my very limited experience, which is cartoon-simple, the faculty see Deans as the enemy and tools of admin, and administrators and officers see Deans at least in part in the same way they see everything else, as potential conduits for revenue. It must demand a tricky balancing act, being a faculty member and a part-time Dean. (The only full-on, 24/7 Dean with whom I spent more than a couple of hours was goofy, earnest, baffling. Once you looked into his khaki-colored eyes, you observed a kind of sweet dissociation.)

As well as the above balancing act, Gary's performance at Roosevelt requires great dedication, discipline, diplomacy, flexibility, an actual working intelligence, and the ability really to hear what other people are saying... you get the picture. Gary

Krauthammer Wolfe likes to pretend he is the most ordinary guy in the room, but the charade falls apart almost every time he opens his mouth. Let me mention first his voice. When the Krauthammer was a boy in Missouri, I bet he didn't sound the way he does now. I always think that Gary sounds urbane, especially when behind a convention podium—polished, cultivated, charming, civilized. It's a great quality, urbanity. The Krauthammer doesn't see himself in these terms, I'm pretty sure. Probably, he thinks urbanity is dubious anyhow, being shallow, redolent of George Sanders, and too smooth by half. Yet, although this will be the first time he hears of this, from almost the true first time I met him, Gary's voice reminded me of someone else, someone I liked, too, not just his voice but the whole person. After six months or so I realized that he was reminding me of Alastair Cook. Cook had presided over *Omnibus*, a great arts program on CBS, and eventually became the well-modulated host of PBS's "Masterpiece Theater." He was the elegant, white-haired character who from 1971 to 1992 sat in a red leather armchair and introduced everything from *I Claudius* to *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Jeeves and Wooster*.

Apart from Gary Koffeeklatsch's agreeable voice, there is also the matter of what he says when he is using it. When speaking, almost everyone falls victim to occasional spells of imprecision, syntax fail, hesitations and other ellipses, grammatical train wrecks, and other forms of error. Almost all of us both repeat ourselves and grope for words. Seeking to be clever, we back into sentences and forget how we got there. Our man G. Kardashian-Kandinsky, or whatever his name is, does none of that. He issues smooth, unbroken ribbons of sound. Individual words slide into slots prepared for them like blocks of cement into a good builder's wall, like the phrases in an exemplary Dexter Gordon solo. (I throw in the more or less obligatory jazz reference in the well-nigh complete certainty that at least our Gary the K. will understand its total perfection.) Teachers in general and particularly college professors, I have observed, share a tendency to be hyper-articulate. Practice has sharpened their fluency into a reflex. It is to be admired, and maybe it is to be, um, aped even though you are aware that you could never really pull it off? Or: "However imperfectly, imitated?" Something like that, something that... suggests... a doomed-to-failure attempt... to scale the old barricade? Sort of pretty much in that ballpark, I'd say. To waffle around like that, in other words to adopt my own carefully chosen mode of verbal conduct, is to fall into a language foreign to these smoothies of the lecture hall. Here, Mr. Gary KW has redefined the limits of the possible, and whatever you thought you were thinking has got to be recontextualized.

If you were to wake this man up out of a coma-like sleep in a darkened room beginning to smell like smoke and tell him the hotel is on fire, he would not go through any of the normal panic business. He wouldn't fall out of bed, flail his arms, and run straight into a wall. Instead of all that embarrassingly human nonsense, KW would take a moment to collect himself, then say something like, "I have to say, what a colossal inconvenience. Massive. They should be ashamed of themselves. Elevator's no go, of course. Staircase is about fifty feet down that way." He would iron the invisible shirt to indicate direction. "Put the palm of your hand on the door before you open it. Room temperature? All right. As Brian Aldiss once said, let's

make tracks.” A step toward the door, then an abrupt halt. “Sorry. I have to take this.” He would slide his laptop off the desk and settle it in his hands. “The column’s due Tuesday after we get back, and I’m half done, but I still have to do about 5,000 words on Kim Robinson, Thomas Pynchon, and Neal Stephenson. That new Jo Walton you’ll never read was the best book this month.”

During his nice unhurried stroll to the staircase, he would say, “Lot of smoke, isn’t there? For some reason, this makes me think of Charles. He was never in a hotel fire, as far as I know. Charles would have refused to clear his room. He would have ordered room service instead, and they would have delivered it, too. Charred haunch of veal, something like that. Eat it with his hands. Two bottles of an Oregon Pinot Noir. Bottle number two would be dessert. ‘I prefer to drink my dessert.’ Charles said that only about five thousand times. Too bad you never spent the night up there in Oakland, you could have had a lot of dessert.”

Outside, our boy Koo Koo slips a hand into a crucial pocket and says, “I was ready to come out here anyway. Must be hours since I had a pipe.” After that, he would spend the next few hours in pensive thought, watching the fireman. He might say, “You know, most of these men drink more than Charles. Northrup Fry’s son-in-law was a firefighter, and he once spent a seminar telling us all about it. Broke his heart.” There might be a pause. “It’s really odd, but William Empson and F. R. Leavis had firefighter sons-in-law, too. Broke their hearts, both of them. Frank Kermode. Wayne Booth., for God’s sake. And come to think of it, Leslie Fiedler, though he doesn’t actually count. Fiedler’s heart wasn’t broken at all. When you went over to his house, there’d be the firefighter, Fuzzy his name was, in uniform, the whole blasted get-up, hat and axe included, handing around a silver tray with martinis on it.”

By the time he puts the warm pipe back into his pocket, the fire is out, the smoke has been cleared, and the guests are allowed to return to their rooms. In the smoke-free elevator, our Koussevitsky-Kossuth murmurs, really to himself; “Strange, how many science fiction novels involve firemen. I have to think about that. Preservation and destruction, that’s the key. No—the impulse *toward* destruction. Yes, of course it’s *much* darker, *way* darker. Set on the moon, set it on Alpha Centauri, on *earth*, be like Bradbury, turn them into Nazis. They rescue your cat, a Nazi rescued your cat. It’s got more than an edge, it’s a humiliation.”

The K. W. is always writing his column. He must be, every issue of *Locus* comes out with another novella-length excursion through five or six worthy novels and short story collections, each column wryly funny, as fluent as Anthony Trollope, and somehow led by the internal voice as much as by the book-by-book judgments. That internal voice is deeply self-assured. It delivers the truth, and it knows it. This confidence is built on an astonishing awareness of science fiction as a whole, as well as a truly well-educated man’s knowledge of literature in general. G. Klepto, he can place books and writers in the literary map, he can give you their taxonomy, and he has taken core samples twenty feet down. His frame of reference is much wider than of other regular reviewers of science fiction. This example, from a recent issue, has nothing to do with literature, but it does reveal

a certain casual inter-generational knowingness: “In a strange way, given the importance of music in [Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Signal to Noise*], it may owe far more to Billie Holiday and Procol Harum (or even to Greil Marcus, given a short bit about bluesman Robert Johnson) than to any sort of genre fantasy.”

In other columns, he points out the relevance of Borges and Swift to Ursula LeGuin; that of Thornton Wilder and Aaron Copeland to Ray Bradbury; hears the voices of the Irish washerwomen from *Finnegans Wake* in a story by Damon Knight; and observes that the Dorothy Gale in Geoff Ryman’s splendid *Was* seemed to have been invented by Thomas Hardy instead of L. Frank Baum. References like these are all over G. Krazy Kat’s work, but of greater, in fact central importance is his capacity for connecting widely different aspects, moments, and writers in the entire history of sf and giving fully informed, nuanced, thoughtful justice to each particular while making their commonalities *unavoidably* clear. It was from Gary I long ago learned that any real appreciation of science fiction involves a knowledge of its history, that science fiction novels speak to one another, refer to one another, in a kind of permanent ongoing subterranean roundelay. The more informed you are, the more you can understand what is taking place on the page. I like this a lot, because it means that the literature is informed, too, always speaking to itself.

The deep coherence of the critical voice is really what permits G. Khrushchev “Ed” Kenneth Koch to be accurate in calling his monthly review round-up a column, as if he were Cindy or Cedric Adams, or Joseph or Stewart Alsop, or Walter Lippman or Walter Bagehot. To a greater or lesser degree but always palpably, month by month each column is a single entity more than it is an odd-job collection of timely book reviews. Plenty of writers yearn to have their names appear in Khrushchev’s column. Appearance there is a sign that you either already have a place in the rolls of the Significant, or that the Premier thinks that you soon will. Naturally, the sf world contains many writers who are a bit sore-headed about never having been considered by G. “The Mayor” Koch, plus a whole lot of others who figure that he will simply have to come around to them in time. If you are one of those people, I offer the following hint. Should the fifth book in your *Protocols of Sex and Politics on Mars* trilogy (expanded) inexplicably pass unremarked through the *Locus* grid, do not imagine that the odds on making it with the trilogy’s sixth installment have just increased. That would be a silly mistake. Our hero does not review books he thinks are not very good, and that’s that. If you think about what he could do with a novel he had found badly written, repulsive, or absurd, you pretty quickly understand that his system is actually merciful.

... Okay, this is a thing. Mr. Gary has been married six times. In order: Cirrus Kesselring, of Missouri, bride and groom both 17. One-week honeymoon in Carlsbad Cavern, quickly followed by posthumous annulment. Roxie Moxborough, 20, Kansas City, the possessor of an arcane numerical system and prone to “voices.” Posthumously divorced. “Tugs” Halliwell, 21, KU, victim of spontaneous combustion. Deenie Theodorakis, 32 Chicago, goatherd, death on hillside by exposure. Lavinia Stride, 40, Chicago, motorcycle stunt rider, death by razor wire decapitation. Herbetta Smote, 49, Chicago,

psycho-geographer, another honeymoon in Carlsbad Caverns, bride lost while spelunking—a sudden tumble into some kind of bottomless hole. It is best never to mention this history to Mr. GKW or his small circle of intimates.

... and okay, this is another thing, too. It's real. The Kraut golfs with an antique set of filigreed Hispaniola Silvers, made of silver melted down from ancient dueling pistols. Shoots in high seventies, but is improving. Member, Maidstone, Burning Tree, and (informally) Yonkers Public. He and I try to play every other weekend at the Ian Fleming Intercoastal, Bermuda. I use the Gibson Myrtle Beach "Bachelor Party" model, classics owned by Mr. Dexter Gordon. Mr. Wally Cox once owned them, too. I shoot in the mid-seventies.

Krafft-Ebbing's invitation-only "dueling party" picnics,

held every year on Henry Darger Day, Catholic Cemetery, Des Plaines, IL, have long been the talk of old-time Chicago fandom. He'd never invite any of those losers.

His first accordion teacher was Fats Domino.

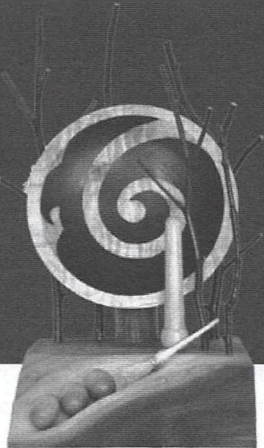
Curious historical fact: his first sidearm was a dueling pistol to which Mr. John Buchan, Canadian national and author of "The Thirty-Nine Steps", owned the mate. Can you imagine?

... Oh, get this. He once said to me, "France is a modest little country, but I think you'll be amused by its pretensions."

G. Kenilworth is my cousin-brother, whom I dearly love, and I shall have no other.



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DIALOGUES WITH THE IMPOSSIBLE (WITH SIDE TRIPS INTO THE NOT POSSIBLE, THE DISPOSSIBLE, THE UNPOSSIBLE, AND THE POSSIBLE BUT STUPID)

Gary K. Wolfe

[This is a slightly adapted version of a talk given at Archipelacon (Finland, June 2015), where the author was the academic guest of honor.]

I am afraid I have to begin with something of a cliché. Those of us who work with science fiction—as scholars, teachers, or writers—have likely had moments that go something like this. A colleague or friend or family member learns of our interest in science fiction and responds, “Oh yes, I really enjoyed the Harry Potter movies.” And then you have to make a decision. You can decide not to pursue the matter further, almost always the simplest course, or you can try to find a succinct way of explaining, in mostly non-literary terms, why fantasy isn’t the same thing as science fiction, and that the Harry Potter movies are, in fact, fantasies. If you have found a simple way of doing this, please let me know. The best I’ve been able to do nearly always leads to a follow-up comment along the lines of, “Oh, you mean *Star Wars*!” Well ... Now you need to make the *real* decision, which is whether or not you really want to go down that rabbit hole, trying to explain why the Force in *Star Wars* is in any way different from spellcasting in a Harry Potter movie, and so on. That conversation, should you decide to pursue it, will represent an afternoon or evening that you will never get back.

When we look at this question from the point of view of literary scholarship, there is good news and bad news, and it’s the same news—namely, that there are plenty of definitions to choose from. Several years ago I compiled a glossary of terms used by critics, theorists, and writers, many of whom had attempted to define science fiction and fantasy. There was one key term repeatedly used in discussing fantasy, which I had traced back at least to the 1950s; it’s still in common use among critics today. “In fantasy,” Stefan Ekman writes in his study *Here Be Dragons*, “the fantastic elements are in some way ‘impossible,’ entailing the presence of events, objects, beings, or phenomena that break the laws of nature of the world as we understand it; in addition, there must be no attempt rationally to persuade the reader of these elements’ putative ‘possibility’ (as there is in much science fiction).” Ekman lists a number of distinguished critics who have so invoked the impossible—W.R. Irwin, Brian Attebery, John Clute, Tom Shippey, Colin Manlove, Ursula K. Le Guin—to which we might add others who simply stopped short of using the word, such as Samuel R. Delany, who de-

scribed the “level of subjunctivity” of fantasy as “*could not have happened*,” or Darko Suvin, who described works of “imaginary cognitions, beyond all real possibilities known or dreamt of in the author’s empirical reality.”

So that cliché I referred to a few minutes ago is simply the shorthand we often find ourselves using when trapped in that conversation with the friend who thinks Harry Potter is science fiction. Science fiction is about the possible, we claim, and fantasy is about the impossible.

Already we are in trouble. Dragons, for example, are an iconic image of fantasy’s deployment of the impossible—but not Anne McCaffrey’s dragons, which, as she repeatedly insisted, are genetically modified denizens of a distant planet. Her famous series began as a couple of novellas in that hardest of hard-SF magazines, *Analog*, in 1967, but only twenty years later a poll of *Locus* magazine readers ranked it as ninth among all-time great fantasy novels. *Star Wars* is full of spaceships, robots, and superweapons, but the plot finally revolves around that apparently supernatural power called “the Force.” Only a handful of the novels and stories of Tom Holt, writing as K.J. Parker, involve any supernatural elements at all, yet he was nominated for three consecutive World Fantasy Awards for novella, winning two of them—for stories that were notably magic-free.

But the problem of the possible vs. the impossible as an engine for fiction goes far back before the current trend of blending or cross-pollinating genres. In fact, the very notion of the “impossible” turns out to be a fairly slippery one. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word has been in use in English since about the early 15th century, but most of those early usages have to do with observations that nothing is impossible for God’s will. Omnipotent deities aside, when did we really begin to draw a line between the possible and the impossible, between (to adapt Delany’s subjunctivity terms) what could have happened and what could *not* have happened? When did we invent the impossible, in the sense that it is now used to distinguish between a work of fantasy, a work of mimetic fiction, and a work of science fiction?

John Clute, in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, suggests this may have happened in the late 18th century, claiming that earlier “taproot texts” may have included fantastic elements, but not in a manner that would “govern its audience’s sense of its generic nature”; his example of a taproot text is Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which he does not count as fantasy, while an early fantasy might be Goethe’s *Faust*, which “clearly reveals its author’s consciousness that he is transforming a traditional story containing supernatural elements into a work mediated through—and in a telling sense defined by—those elements.” Clute develops this idea further in his essay “Fantastika and the World Storm,” in which he writes that “Up until about 1700 ... we did not categorize works of art according to their use of (or failure to use) elements that might be deemed unreal or impossible to realize in the world as normally perceived.” At that point, he says, a “fault line” was drawn between mimetic work and the work he labels *fantastika*. And fifty years later, the mid-18th century “marks the point when Western Civilization begins to understand that we do not occupy a world but a planet. It is from this point that science—astronomy, physics, geology, biology—begins to shape our understanding that we are a spe-

cies clinging to a ball that may one day spin us off; that the past is deeper than we can conceive; that the future is going to rip us apart.” In other words, the possible became a matter of scientific discourse rather than religious faith.

This is getting us very close to the notion of the impossible as a difference between fantasy and science fiction, and it also gets us close to what many regard as the beginning of modern science fiction in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. But Brian Attebery suggests that this fault line may extend further back even than that. In *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*, he explores the dual evolution of mythic tales and early forms of fantasy, and notes (citing Robert Segal) that while Apollodorus tells the story of Adonis in the second century BC, as literal truth, Ovid retelling the same story almost two centuries later presents it as fiction, taking liberties with his sources, arranging material to fit his thematic plan, and inviting a reading more metaphorical than literal, a reading that doesn’t insist on the acceptance of the events described as even possible.

While I’m not suggesting that examples like this represent specific moments of transition between myth and fantasy, or myth and fiction—that is, of course, a centuries-long process—it’s always tempting and fun, to look for key moments along the continuum, as Jorge Luis Borges does when he playfully suggests that an “ideal date” for the passage from allegories to novels—“from the species to the individual,” might have been in 1382 when Geoffrey Chaucer, wanting to translate a line from Boccaccio that literally read “Treachery with hidden weapons,” came up with “the smyler with the knyf under the cloke” in “The Knight’s Tale.”

Chaucer, by the way, was also one of the first English-language writers to use the word “fantasye,” and according to Brian Stableford he used it to refer to “strange and bizarre notions that have no basis in everyday experience,” which again gets us reasonably close to the contemporary meaning of the term, although he doesn’t specify that business about the impossible in so many words. But it seems that we are clearly moving in that direction, from the abstract to the specific, from myths which might have been possible to stories which clearly are not, from a story disguised as revealed truth to a story that knows it’s a story.

By the late 18th century, as Clute notes, readers were clearly enjoying stories of impossible events which could not be mistaken for mythology or religious miracles. I doubt that anyone reading *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 came away worried about being crushed by a giant helmet falling from nowhere, and the Gothic novel went on for decades reveling in impossibilities (with the exception of Mrs. Radcliffe and a few others). But toward the end of this era we get *Frankenstein*, with Mary Shelley almost boasting in the very first sentence of her preface to the 1818 edition that “The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence.” *Not of impossible occurrence*. Whether or not we want to get into the debate over whether this represents, as Brian Aldiss and others have claimed, the birth of modern science fiction, it certainly seems to mark an effort to reclaim some of the effects of the Gothic novel from the realm of the impossible into the realm of the possible. And, I would argue, it helped to establish

the ongoing dialogue between the possible and the impossible that provides the title of this piece.

Now I would like to take a brief side trip into some questions of philology. Obviously, “possible” and “impossible” are value-laden terms whose values shift over time, as notions of consensus reality shift. These days, if you come shambling out of your grave a few days after you were buried, it means you’re a zombie, and that’s clearly impossible given what we know about biology. A century ago it probably meant you were a vampire, which might or might not have seemed possible given the various beliefs of that era. And a couple of millennia before *that*, it meant that you were Jesus, and an entire dominant structure of Western thought would grow around the conviction that this was not only possible, but historical fact.

So maybe we need a somewhat more finely tuned vocabulary beyond this simple dichotomy of possible/impossible. Let me suggest a few somewhat more nuanced variations. In addition to possible and impossible, let’s consider the *not possible*, the *unpossible*, the *dispossible*, and my own slightly off-kilter addition to the discussion, which I admit is not quite parallel to the others, which I am calling the *possible but stupid*.

“Not possible,” for our purposes here, might refer to something that could happen but is simply not going to. Not possible is what you are told when you ask if you can get your computer back from the repair shop in time for next week’s deadline. In science fiction terms, all those enthusiastic readers from the 1930s and 1940s who spent their lives pining for those portable jetpacks they had been reading about eventually came to the sad realization that, well, I’m sorry, that’s just not possible. In more recent science fiction terms, a convenient solution for the vexing problem of interstellar travel, from Frederik Pohl’s *Gateway* to the movie *Interstellar*, is to have an advanced but philanthropically-minded alien race leave wormholes or FTL spaceships lying around for our use, much as we might leave a set of automobile keys lying around in the chimpanzee habitat at the zoo, in case they decide to evolve while we’re not looking. It’s not quite impossible, but it’s not going to happen. We’ll come back to this a bit later.

“Unpossible” is the title of a 2007 short story by Daryl Gregory. A middle-aged man mourning the death of his wife and son finds his childhood bicycle, which has a kind of magical shifting mechanism and compass which stopped working for him when he was thirteen. The DeShifter, as he calls it, has settings like “inadvisable” and “completely out of the question,” while the compass lists directions like “unfamiliar,” “unknown,” and “unpossible.” This leads him into a world made of elements from his favorite childhood stories, such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

When I asked Daryl about his title, he said “that word had connotations of not just ‘not possible,’ but the mirror image of possible—a world with its own physics, like the ‘rules’ of all the children’s fantasy books that inspired the story.” His use of the phrase “the mirror image of possible” recalls Farah Mendlesohn’s description of what she calls “immersive fantasy” as “the mirror of mimetic literature and its inner soul” and indeed such fantasy, with its potential for an entirely new set of physical laws, makes a few more imaginative demands on us than simply

believing, like the White Queen, in six impossible things before breakfast—which is enough to get us through most fantasy and horror stories. In this sense, then, the word “impossible” seems rather a tepid description of such worlds.

“Dispossible” is a term I admit to having just made up, although it does appear to be the name of a design firm in Britain, but it’s a way of bringing into this discussion another class of stories that can be revealing in what they suggest about the possible/impossible dichotomy—namely, the tale of alternate history or alternate cosmology. These are stories that take place, as it were, entirely off to the side of the possible or impossible. Most alternate histories, such as Ian McDonald’s *Planesrunner* series or Terry Pratchett and Stephen Baxter’s *Long Earth* series (to use some current examples) take place in alternate versions of Earth in which, for example, England never experienced a Steam Age or humans never evolved, but for the most part these worlds are constrained by the same physical laws as our own. The only way to admit such stories into the traditional realm of the science fictionally possible is through a rather generous reading of Hugh Everett’s many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, and even then it would barely squeeze into our category of the not possible.

The alternate cosmology tale, on the other hand, may undercut even those physical laws, displacing the notion of the possible several steps further removed from our own experience. One of my favorite examples is Philip José Farmer’s 1952 story “Sail On! Sail On!,” which at first appears to be an alternate history in which Christopher Columbus’s ships are equipped with radio and other modern devices, thanks to an early development of electrical technology in Europe following the research of Roger Bacon and others. But it’s a mistake to read the story as simple alternate history, because, as we eventually learn, the Americas do not exist to be discovered in this world; the world itself is a flat disk, and Columbus and his ships promptly sail over the edge. Ever the trickster, Farmer has misdirected us into believing we’re reading an alternate history, only to pull the rug, and indeed the entire floor, out from under us by revealing the actual nature of this world. In a similar vein, Ted Chiang has written stories set in such alternate cosmologies as the worldview of Babylonian mythology (“The Tower of Babylon”) or fundamentalist Christian theology (“Hell Is the Absence of God”), arguing that such stories are actually science fiction since once he establishes the ground rules for whatever belief system he is using, he follows them rigorously, extrapolating from them in much the same way traditional SF extrapolates from our own cosmology. It’s exactly such a shift in ground rules that I am labeling the “dispossible.”

This leads us to my final category, the possible but stupid, which as I said isn’t quite parallel with the others, but which seems so common that it’s worth at least a note. *Frankenstein* is probably the ur-example of the possible but stupid story, because Victor Frankenstein simply hasn’t thought through what he is doing. He’s a bad father, a negligent teacher—Stacie Hanes’s dissertation demonstrates this—and a rather sloppy scientist, who commits to what is possible only *because* it is possible, and perhaps out of a kind of inflated Promethean self-regard. This has become such a pervasive theme in science fiction that it prompted Brian Aldiss—the noted champion of

Frankenstein as the first SF novel—to define the entire genre by the phrase “*hubris clobbered by nemesis*.” You can grow robots in vats, as Čapek’s scientists do in *R.U.R.*, but it’s a stupid idea because they’ll eventually supplant you and your fellow humans entirely. You can build a Skynet, but it’s a stupid idea because it will lead to, among other things, an endless supply of *Terminator* movies. You *might* be able to clone dinosaurs from ancient DNA preserved in amber, but they will eat you, and besides, those movies are just as stupid as the *Terminator* movies. The message, of course, is that what is possible is not always what is sensible. Maybe a more polite way of labeling such stories would be “possible but not a very good idea,” although science fiction writers have habitually argued that we’re probably always going to be too stupid to see this.

As I hope these variations suggest, the ongoing dialogue between the possible and impossible has grown increasingly complicated from the very moment those terms became distinct modalities. So before I conclude, I want to briefly explore *why* it has grown so complicated, and perhaps why it is more in flux in today’s fantastic fiction than at any period in the past. And I would like to do this by examining three recurrent themes which, although impossible by science fiction’s own litmus tests, have nevertheless become widely popular conventions in the genre. These are (1) time travel, (2) FTL travel, and (3) precognition and other psionic powers. My thesis in choosing these examples is rather simple: sometime after science fiction began to decide that its purview would be the possible, while other forms of the fantastic could deal with the impossible, science fiction realized that it had left a lot of valuable cards on the table, and it wanted them back.

Let’s begin with time travel. This was a recurring theme in fiction long before Wells’s *The Time Machine*, but it was pretty clearly confined to the realm of the impossible. The characters in the Norwegian-Danish poet Johan Herman Wessel’s *Anno 7603* (1781) are whisked off to the 77th century by a friendly fairy, while Scrooge in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is able to visit the past and future with the aid of ghosts. Probably the best-known time travel tale prior to Wells was Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). To be fair, Wells had published “The Chronic Argonauts” in his college newspaper some months before Twain’s novel appeared, but then Twain had apparently been working on his idea as early as 1884. In any event, Hank Morgan, the munitions manufacturer who finds himself waking up in Arthurian England, arrives there by getting hit on the head with a crowbar. And if we look at some of the many utopian novels from around this period, such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) or William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890), it seems the preferred method for traveling into the future consists of falling asleep.

So. Fairies, ghosts, getting hit on the head, and falling asleep—as a means of time travel, these are not exactly what we would call replicable experiments. Just as those Gothic readers didn’t really worry much about giant falling helmets, I doubt that any Twain readers tried clobbering themselves with metal rods in hopes of meeting King Arthur. Readers accepted the impossibilities as impossibilities, and got on with the story. Even Henry James took a swing at the time travel story. The operative

word in Wells's famous title, then, is not "time," but "machine." It has a "glittering metallic framework," parts of it are made of nickel, parts of ivory, and parts of an unidentified crystalline substance. By adopting at least a simulacrum of the language of the industrial age, Wells wants us to at least entertain the possibility that such a machine, simply because it *is* a machine, can claim the magical idea of time travel into the vocabulary of science fiction, of the possible. It's all handwaving, of course, just as Wells's "cavorite" in *The First Men in the Moon* claims the magical idea of levitation for the vocabulary of geology and physics. It also is the sort of thing that earned the ire of Jules Verne, the first great defender of science fiction as the art of the possible, who famously complained of Wells that "I make use of physics ... he invents."

But Wells won the point, because time travel by machine has been a staple of science fiction ever since, even in the work of hyper-rationalists like Isaac Asimov, and it eventually led to later writers like Connie Willis to have to concoct various "rules" of the continuum such as slippages and prohibitions from arriving at key "divergence points" in the past. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that these "rules" are the time travel writer's equivalent of the epicycles of pre-Galilean astronomy.

In recent years, though, time travel seems to have escaped the bounds of even science fiction. In her 1979 novel *Kindred*, Octavia Butler—who certainly knew her way around science fiction when she wanted to—has her protagonist, a young African-American woman, repeatedly yanked back in time to a slave plantation in Maryland in order to save her ancestor from being killed before he can father her ancestral line. There is no time machine involved, and for that matter no fairies, ghosts, or blows on the head—no explanation at all. Butler recognized time travel for what it had really been all along—a plot device which she needed simply in terms of her narrative. So did Jane Yolen when she transported a contemporary Jewish girl back to the Poland of the Holocaust in *The Devil's Arithmetic*. More recently, Lauren Beukes, in *The Shining Girls*, used time travel for what is essentially a serial-killer mystery; the killer simply lives in a house which magically deposits him in various periods of Chicago history so that he can commit his crimes without detection. Much the same might be said of Audrey Niffenegger's bestseller (and the film made from it) *The Time Traveler's Wife* and Richard Curtis's 2013 film *About Time*, in which time travel simply provides complications for a romantic comedy. Science fiction may have laid claim to time travel for more than a century, but it no longer owns it at all.

My second example, faster-than-light travel, was invented by science fiction writers as a convenient but thoroughly unlikely solution to a real problem of physics—namely, that even the shortest interstellar distances are impossible to reach within the narrative time frame demanded by traditional adventure fiction or space opera. Without getting into all the various handwaving gestures—warp drives or wormholes or "folding space"—that bit of business invariably illustrated by drawing X's on either end of a sheet of paper and then bending the paper to bring them together—the desire to be able to conveniently get to other worlds reflects another impossibility that SF long ago ceded to fantasy—and now wants back. We might call it

"portal envy": fantasy can get you to another world through the simple expedient of walking through a wardrobe or finding the right platform at King's Cross Station, but getting to a usable science fiction world requires a tiresome degree of imaginative gesticulating, so it's not surprising that one of the shorthand gestures is what I mentioned earlier, alien wormholes or derelict spacecraft—what we might call *alienus ex machina*. Essentially the argument is, "we can't figure out how to do this, but maybe someone else did."

Other than that, the only real strategies available to SF writers have been to confine their interplanetary adventures to our own solar system, as Paul McAuley, Alastair Reynolds, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Neil Stephenson have recently done, or commit to a generation starship tale, which rather severely constrains the capacity to have multiple planetary adventures. Besides, on the evidence of arguments in Robinson's most recent novel *Aurora*, we might eventually need to consign the generation starship tale to that new category I mentioned earlier: possible but stupid. You will need to read Robinson's novel in order to find out what I mean by that.

This leaves us with the third major theme or group of themes that science fiction has tried to salvage from the scrapheap: of the impossible: precognition and various other psychic or psionic powers, including ESP, telepathy, telekinesis, pyrokinesis, and mind control. Some of these, of course, have a long and complicated history in folklore and folklore-based fiction, such as George MacDonald's *The Portent* (1864), about the "second sight" thought to be possessed by Scottish highlanders, or in later occult novels, or fantasies with wizards and witches, all the way down to horror stories like Stephen King's *Carrie* or *The Shining*. But what is interesting about this particular negotiation with the impossible is that it played out very publicly in the editorial policies, and possibly in the mind, of one of SF's most influential editors, John W. Campbell, Jr.

Campbell was, or at least pretended to be, a hard-headed rationalist, demanding stringently logical futures of both scientific and social verisimilitude, but on the other hand, he was fatally attracted to the impossibilities of fantasy, even to the point of starting an alternative magazine, *Unknown*, to accommodate the good story ideas his authors came up with that couldn't fit his vision of *Astounding*. But even that magazine often tried to reclaim fantasy's impossibilities for SF, such as Jack Williamson's "Darker than You Think," with its rather contorted ethnological explanation for werewolves, or Eric Frank Russell's *Sinister Barrier*, with its appeal to Charles Fort's pseudoscientific view of anomalous phenomena. Oddly, though, when ideas of telepathy or other psychic powers showed up in the work of A.E. Van Vogt and others, they were more likely to appear in *Astounding* rather than in *Unknown*.

One reason for this may be that when Campbell attended Duke University, a faculty member named J.B. Rhine had already set up his laboratory to investigate ESP, telekinesis, and the like, so it's entirely possible Campbell could have gotten the notion that there was actual science behind ESP on the basis of those experiments, which later turned out to be thoroughly unreplicable. And after the bomb, it became convenient to combine this conceit with the then largely unknown mutational effects of nuclear radiation, which led to a long string of stories

from the 1940s and 1950s all the way down to today's X-Men. It virtually became a convention in SF, and later in comics, that nuclear radiation could at the very least make you telepathic.

Campbell grew more enamored of pseudoscience as a means of reclaiming the impossible, championing such loony ideas the perpetual-motion Dean Drive, the Hieronymus Machine (which amplified psychic signals or something), and—most of all—Dianetics, which he introduced in the May 1950 issue of *Astounding*. Perhaps the evolution of Dianetics into Scientology is the most highly visible effort to dress the impossibilities of fantasy in the costume of science, since even today they claim to be both a science and a religion at the same time. In some of his crankier editorials and letters of the 1950s Campbell, still adopting his rationalist guise, began attacking mainstream scientists for not looking at the evidence supporting his various pet projects, when of course that is exactly what they were doing. Even longtime supporters like Asimov grew embarrassed at their association with Campbell.

Now, I'm not claiming that the principal source of Campbell's increasing nuttiness derived from a burning desire to reclaim the impossible materials of fantasy for science fiction—in fact in those editorials I am referring to, he barely mentioned fiction at all—but I can't help wonder if it was a part of it. After all, it was Campbell who bought those first genetic-dragon stories from Anne McCaffrey, which seems an iconic example of reclaiming fantasy concepts for science fiction.

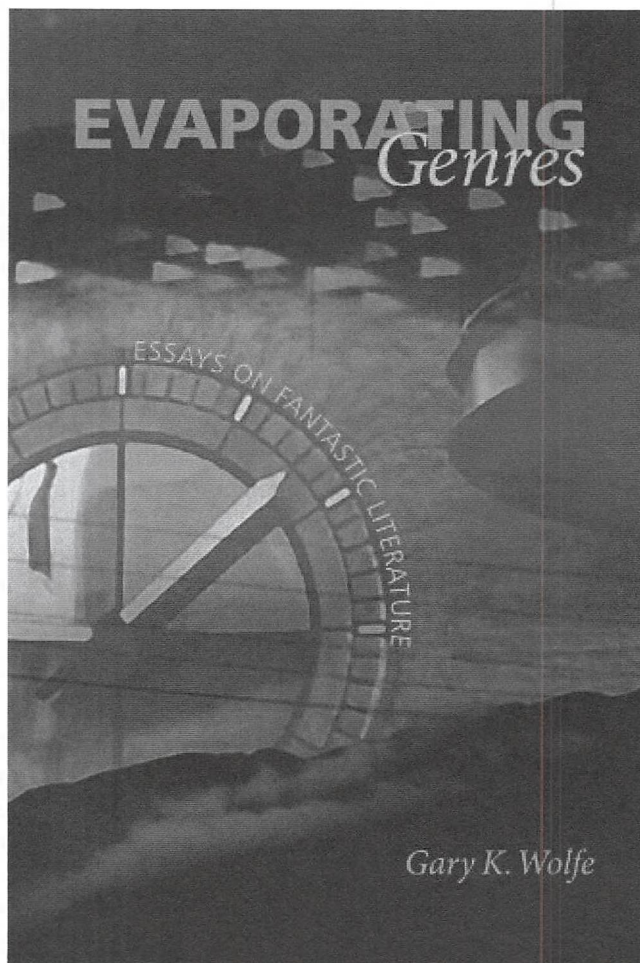
This doesn't quite bring us down to the present, but it gets us within forty years or so of it (Campbell died in 1971). So I'll conclude with two rather hasty generalizations about what has happened in that last forty years or so. The first generalization is this: *science fiction discovers the plot device*, and the second is, *None of what I have said here today matters today*, or at least matters mostly in terms of past literary history.

Remember those time-travel stories I mentioned by Octavia Butler, Jane Yolen, and Lauren Beukes? None of them seemed to care much about rationalizing their time-travel motifs as anything other than a necessary literary device to tell the stories they wanted to tell. And as for McCaffrey's dragons, they've been answered to some extent by Michael Swanwick's dragons (in *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* and *The Dragons of Babel*), which have afterburners and metallic hides, but which also seem telepathic. The world they live in is half-possible and half-impossible, and Swanwick doesn't care: it's the world he wanted to tell his story in, along the way making a few satirical observations about the conventions of both science fiction and fantasy. In other words, it's a literary device.

Increasingly, like Swanwick, contemporary writers have simply chosen to ignore the possible/impossible dichotomy that haunted so much of the dialogue between fantasy and science fiction in the twentieth century, and while I could cite any number of authors, from Ted Chiang to Rachel Swirsky, a recent excellent example is Johanna Sinisalo's *The Blood of Angels*. Its basic premise is firmly rooted in the possible: Colony Collapse Disorder among bees has become so widespread that food riots plague the US, refugees from the agriculturally devastated California flee into neighboring states, and worldwide food prices have quadrupled. The narrator Orvo is a funeral director and part-time beekeeper, and even his funeral business

has plausible futuristic touches, like online memorial groves with a kind of primitive AI to represent the personality of the deceased. His son is a web designer and animal-rights blogger. Yet in the midst of all this all-too-credible extrapolation of a near-apocalyptic future, Orvo, after discovering that one of his own hives has been mysteriously abandoned and while carrying a dead queen bee in his pocket, finds a magical and quite impossible portal to a pristine world in the loft of his barn. This world, which he at first suspects might be in the past but comes to realize is more likely the future, is devoid of humans, but seems clearly connected to the bees—in fact, it's a kind of bee utopia, with fields of verdant flowers and absolutely pure air. The language used to discuss the bees is a mixture of scientific data, activist outrage (in the son's blog) and mythical and folkloristic beliefs, the discourse of science fiction balanced with the discourses of fantasy, the possible in a kind of elegant equilibrium with the impossible.

Is it science fiction, or fantasy, or both, or neither? What it is, is what fantastic literature has finally begun to come to terms with. It's a story.



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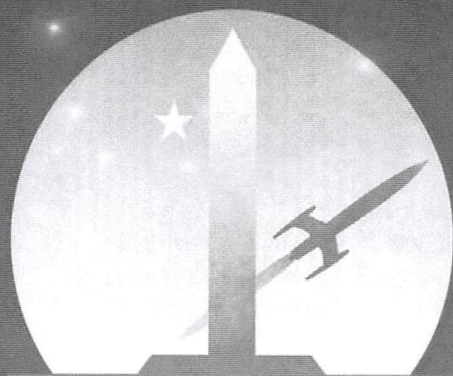
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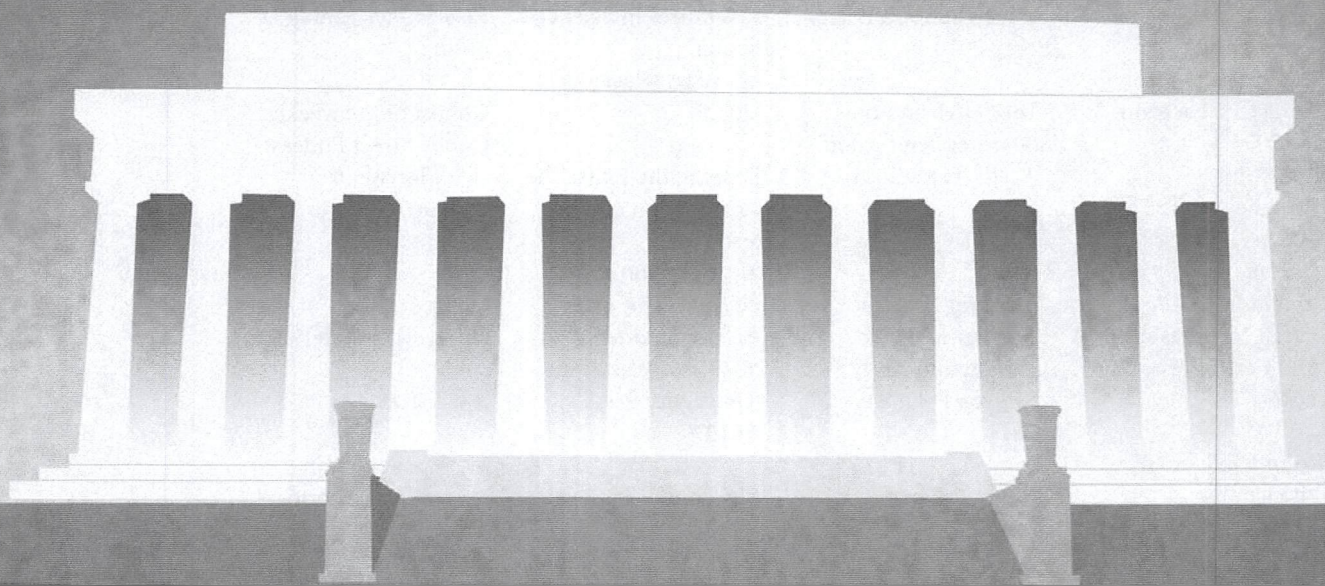
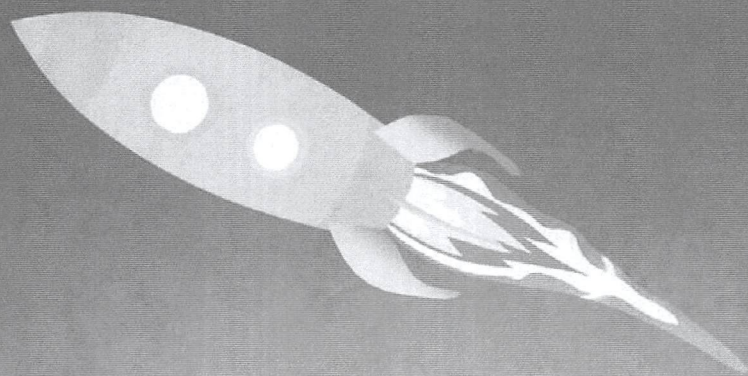


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Joanna Russ



EVERYONE SHOULD MEET JOANNA RUSS

Nicola Griffith

Joanna Russ's work, sometimes difficult, often brilliant, and always eye-opening, shaped me. I never met her in person, though, her work had to be enough. Mind you, I was lucky: her work was available when I needed it. Today, though much of her non-fiction is still in print, many of her novels are not, and very little of her short fiction. Someone should fix that. She's no longer here to meet, but her work should be.

"The Mystery of the Young Gentleman" epitomises what those who've never read her short fiction are missing. It's a 1982 novelette in which style is beautifully balanced against story, fast-moving, thrilling, and sly. I imagine I'll talk about it this weekend. Perhaps I'll button-hole some unsuspecting soul at a party, who will blink, paste on an obliging expression—and silently panic. *Surely I've read this!* they'll think as I enthuse. *Haven't I?* Meanwhile, I talk more emphatically, start gesturing with my beer. Their amiability stiffens then cracks. They laugh and admit they have no clue what I'm talking about. I grin, get myself another beer, and start again.

It's set on a clipper ship sailing from England to the US in the late nineteenth century, narrated by a—I pause, because already we're in tricky waters, but—woman, I say. Because if you follow the textual clues that's what makes most sense—biologically speaking at least. Though the narrator could, just possibly, be a man or trans or intersexual, or, at a stretch, part alien. And of course the point of the story is to deconstruct gender's pernicious binary, throw out the Either/Or and replace it with Neither/Nor and a sprinkle of Yes/And. The narrator does not identify as gendered at all but, Wittig-like, insists that among their people there are no men and no women: if all refuse gender, there's no need to perform it. But for now—because, hey, we're at a party (and on our umpteenth beer)—let's say it's a woman.

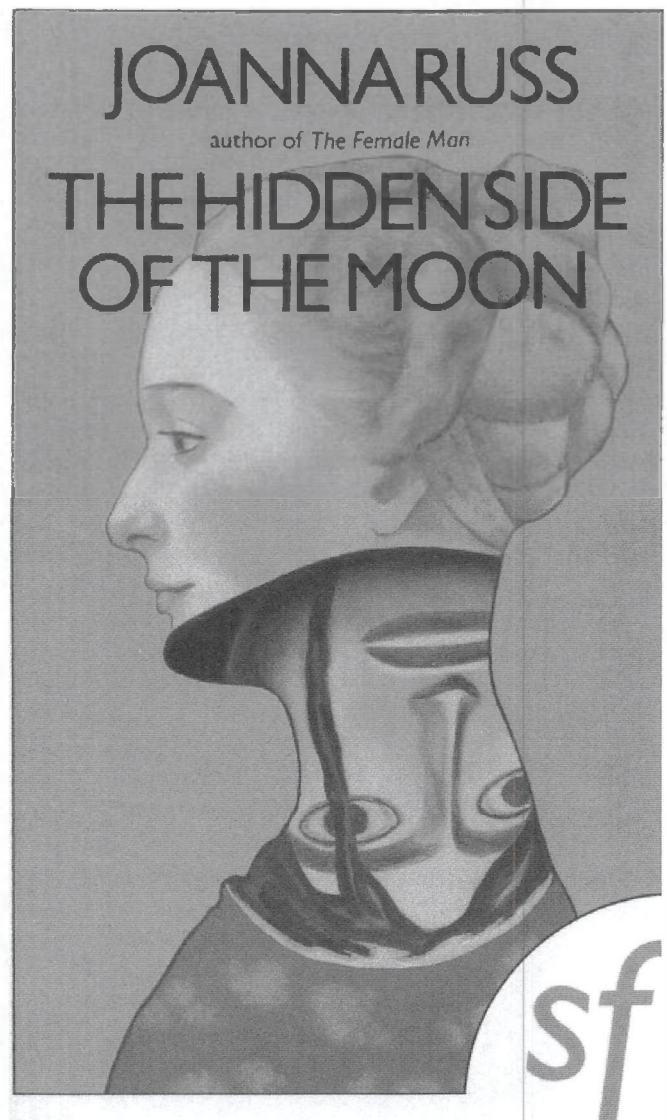
So, *It's about a woman and her young charge*—who is definitely a girl, or more precisely a young woman, but in any case not a lady, oh no—*who are travelling as father and daughter.* Though, oh dear me, their relationship is not filial. Not at all.

So, *It's about a woman and girl on a transatlantic crossing who use gender performance to stay safe.* Not 'Safe from teh menz' but safe from mundanes. And, woo hoo!, now we're in sturdy sf territory. Our protagonists, you see, are telepaths. And Russ has a tremendously fine time fucking with everyone's heads as she ratchets up the stakes.

So, *It's sharp, witty, genderqueer science fiction.* Think about that: genderqueer, nearly ten years before the publication of Judith Butler's ovular *Gender Trouble*. But we're talking about Russ, so sharp, witty, genderqueer science fiction is not all it is. It's also historical fiction—a parody of Victorian porn. And pulp adventure fiction, with sex and guns and gambling debts, dramatic reversals and danger. It's also, in more ways than one, a comedy of manners. So many high wires at once and Russ makes it look effortless. Exhilarating stuff!

As soon as my interlocutor is intrigued I drop the hammer and explain that, sadly, the story is no longer in print. (I can't help it, I'm a writer and so addicted to the heady rush of reversals. Besides, chatting about the neuroscience of same is usually good for another beer.)

One day someone will curate a collection of Russ's finest short fiction and publish them as a single handsome hardcover. Meanwhile, seek out her old collections. Read them. Any of them; all of them. They'll make you chortle with glee. Also, I'm much less likely to panic you at parties.



JOANNA RUSS'S "ALYX" STORIES: ADVENTURES IN SF TRADITION

Gary K. Wolfe

[Adapted and condensed from "Alyx Among the Genres," in *On Joanna Russ*, edited by Farah Mendlesohn, Wesleyan University Press, 2009]

Damon Knight's paperback *Orbit* series between 1966 and 1976 is deservedly regarded as one of SF's great series of original anthologies. With its second issue in 1967, Knight took the unusual step of including two fairly long stories by the same author: "I Gave Her Sack and Sherry" and "The Adventuress," both by Joanna Russ and both featuring a character named Alyx, a mercenary adventurer, thief, and murderer in a sword-and-sorcery environment set in the Mediterranean world around 1500 BC. Two more Alyx stories appeared in later *Orbits*, and in 1968 Russ published her only Alyx novel, *Picnic on Paradise*. (A fifth Alyx story appeared in 1974.) Only thirty years old when the first of the Alyx tales appeared (the same age as Alyx herself), Russ had previously published only a handful of short stories in the genre.

While the Alyx tales have often been viewed as the early work of a feminist author in a formative phase, only a couple of years separate the final Alyx tale from Russ's famous "breakout" works, the Nebula-winning "When It Changed" in 1972 and the now-classic *The Female Man* in 1975. And the Alyx tales were measurably influential. Nancy Kress, who described Alyx as "an independent woman in a patriarchal pre-industrial society who breaks free of its constraints,"

credited them with having given rise to a whole trend of women writers creating "female Amazon figures, warriors or wizards or assassins"—though she complains that some later writers simply offered female versions of Robert E. Howard's Conan. And Mary Gentle, discussing her book *Rats and Gargoyles*, said "although Moorcock was an undoubtedly an influence, the closer one—or the one I thought of at the time of writing—was Joanna Russ, and her "Alyx" stories: three of which are Leiberesque fantasy (with some science fantasy included), and then there's the novel, which is plain SF. And she doesn't apologize, and she doesn't explain. And if she could do it, I thought: why not me?"

It might seem odd to mention writers like Howard, Leiber, and Moorcock in the context of an author whose main reputation is as one of SF's angriest and wittiest feminist voices, but they help underline the degree to which Russ knew, understood, and consciously manipulated the history and conventions of the field—not only in her fiction, but in her sharp critical essays and reviews, which won her a Pilgrim Award from the Science Fiction Research Association in 1988. And the Alyx stories can certainly be seen as critical fictions, undermining, exploiting, and revising such traditional SF forms as the sword-and-sorcery tale, the science fiction puzzle tale, the planetary adventure, and the time-travel story. Russ both celebrated and subverted these forms, drawing on their narrative energy while adapting them to her own social and feminist concerns.

Russ's familiarity with science fiction and fantasy traditions is evident throughout the Alyx tales. In the very first story, "The Adventuress," Alyx describes a former lover as "a big Northman with hair like yours and a gold-red beard—God, what a beard!—Fafnir—no, Fafh—well, something ridiculous. But he was far from ridiculous. He was amazing." As Samuel R. Delany noted, this is almost certainly an allusion to the hero of Fritz Leiber's long-running series of sword-and-sorcery tales featuring two rather disreputable heroes named Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser—stories with which Russ was familiar. Leiber returned the favor by including Alyx as a minor character in his two of his own stories

and by providing a generous blurb for the paperback of *Picnic on Paradise*, describing it as "the only science fiction novel I've read in a single sitting in the past ten years." And it seems likely that Leiber's corrupt and teeming city of Lankhmar provided the template for Russ's own City of Ourdh ("that noble, despicable, profound, simple-minded and altogether exasperating capitol of the world") as it did for many later fantasy cities, including Terry Pratchett's Ankh-Morpork.

Another Alyx story, "The Barbarian," is a kind of transition between the historical fantasy setting of the first two tales and the more science fiction-like tales that came later, "Picnic on Paradise" and "The Second Inquisition." One of the science fiction images, for example, is an invisible force-field which surrounds a "wizard's castle." Trying to sneak past this force-field, Alyx thinks like an experimental scientist. She takes off one of her sandals and learns that it passes through unimpeded, then kills a crab and tosses it through as well. "*The distinction, then, she thought, is between life and death.*" But then she notices the crab, not quite dead after all, stirring on the other side of the barrier, and revises her hypothesis—the barrier simply "kept out any conscious mind." Pressing an artery on the back of her neck to cause herself to briefly lose consciousness, she falls through the barrier. This is a direct and almost certainly deliberate echo of Fredric Brown's classic 1944 story "Arena" (which had even been adapted as an episode of *Star Trek* in 1967). In Brown's tale, a spaceman named Carson finds himself alone and naked on a strange planet, separated from an enemy alien only by an invisible force field. The puzzle, of course, is how to cross the barrier to engage in combat. When he's struck by a rock thrown by the alien, Carson surmises that the barrier may screen organic from inorganic, but then realizes that a dead lizard can also pass through. He tries unsuccessfully to toss a living lizard through, then concludes—like Alyx—that "the screen was a barrier to living things." Later, however, he realizes that the lizard he'd thought was dead was only unconscious, and by hitting himself on the head with a rock (somewhat less elegant than Alyx's solution), he is able to cross the barrier and vanquish the enemy.

With *Picnic on Paradise*, Alyx moves into yet another subgenre of the fantastic, the planetary romance, and again alludes enthusiastically to these earlier traditions. Alyx is now an agent for the “Trans-Temporal Authority,” assigned to assist a group of tourists stranded on the planet Paradise during a trade war. The notion of a kind of “time police” had been a familiar one in SF for some time, but the main function of the Trans-Temporal Authority here is simply to get Alyx from the past into the future, where she again functions as a guide and, eventually, a kind of mentor. (We learn a great deal more about the Authority in Russ’s later novel, *The Two of Them* [1978]).

The only credible reason given for Alyx’s assignment to rescue the group of tourists stranded on Paradise, apart from her hardiness and ingenuity, is her very ignorance of technology. Like “The Barbarian,” *Picnic on Paradise* also is a puzzle-tale. Alyx’s assignment is simply to lead the tourists on foot several hundred kilometers across the snowy mountains of Paradise to a neutral base from which they will be able to leave the planet. But there is, of course, a catch: because of the ongoing trade war, the entire planet is monitored by satellite-based electronic surveillance, and no advanced technology can be used to assist them: “No fires ... no weapons, no transportation, no automatic heating, no food processing, nothing airborne,” not even anything metal, although Alyx is given a non-metal crossbow and synthetic knives to replace her own. This levels the playing field, of course: Alyx may be at a disadvantage because of her near-complete ignorance of the technologically advanced society in which she finds herself, but the no-tech rule effectively strips the tourists of any advantages they may have because of their technology, and sets up the puzzle of how to survive a journey on an alien planet without benefit of any of the technology that got the tourists there in the first place.

The tourists Alyx is hired to protect are representatives of their leisure society’s decadence, discussing various body modifications and the pleasures of installing free-fall in their bathrooms. One such household amenity, “simulated forests with walls that went *tweet-tweet*,” is a pretty clear allusion to Ray Brad-

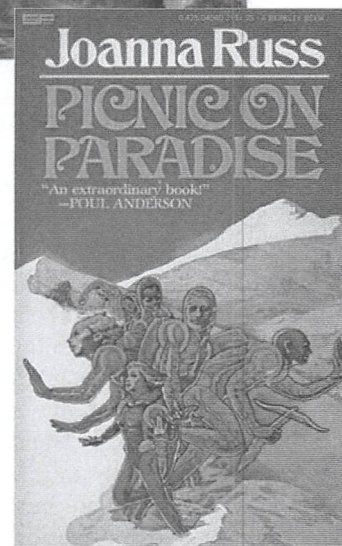
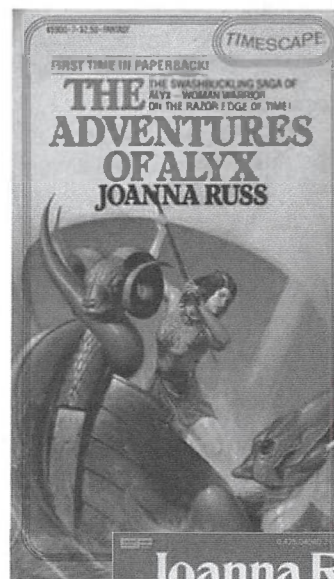
bury’s famous 1950 story “The Veldt,” in which a similar artificial environment is installed in a child’s playroom. In general, they are a familiar crew: a famous amateur explorer, an artist, a politician, a pair of nuns (of an indeterminate religion), a young woman (who behaves like an adolescent, but is actually 36, and who comes under Alyx’s tutelage), her mother (who is dependent on rejuvenation drugs which she now cannot have), an alienated but beautiful youth called Machine (who tunes out the world with his psionic entertainment headware called a Trivia, in a rather remarkable anticipation of today’s post-iPod generation). Machine eventually become Alyx’s lover, but for the most part she retains her distance from the group. In short, Paradise is anything but a picnic, but it’s also a demonstration that the Competent Man role so common to classic SF might as easily be assumed by a Competent Woman.

The final story in *The Adventures of Alyx*, “The Second Inquisition,” published in 1968, differs radically from all the others; instead of being set in a mythical past or a science fiction future, it takes place in a middle-class household in an American small town in 1925; instead of the voice of an ironically detached narrator, it is told by a precocious 16-year-old girl; most importantly, Alyx herself seems to be entirely missing from the tale. The narrator’s family hosts a mysterious boarder, pretending to be a circus worker, but who in fact turns out to be another Trans-Temporal agent, from 450 years in the future. Again, there seem to be allusions to classic SF stories. Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore’s 1946 novella *Vintage Season* features a group of strange tourists who, like the visitor here, take up residence in a middle-class household overlooking a large city, only to later be revealed as time-tourists seeking a safe vantage point from which to view a coming disaster. And later, when the narrator asks the mysterious visitor if she herself is a Morlock from H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, the visitor agrees wholeheartedly:

I am a Morlock on vacation. I have come from the last Morlock meeting, which is held out between the stars in a big goldfish bowl, so all the Morlocks have to cling to the inside walls like a flock of black bats, some right side up,

some upside down, for there is no up and down ... There are half a thousand Morlocks and we rule the worlds. (171)

“The Second Inquisition” offers many more narrative complexities, including the mystery of Alyx’s role in it and her possible relationship to the young narrator, but for our purposes here, it’s another example of Russ’s knowledgeable and sophisticated engagement with classic SF. By the time we reach this tale, we have visited the sword-and-sorcery yarns of the pulp era, the science fiction puzzle-tale of the genre’s “golden age,” the planetary romance, and the equally ubiquitous time travel story. For all her incalculable contributions to the development of a truly feminist science fiction, these stories demonstrate that she was also a pioneer of critical fictions, both deeply engaged with and deeply subversive of the genre’s earlier traditions.



MY HAIR STOOD ON END! TALKING WITH JOANNA RUSS ABOUT SLASH, COMMUNITY, AND FEMALE SEXUALITY

Interview by Consuela Francis
and Alison Piepmeier

[First published in *The Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, issue 1.2, 31 March 2011. The interviewers are associate professors in the Department of English, College of Charleston, where Dr. Francis directs the African American Studies program, and Dr. Piepmeier directs the Women's and Gender Studies program. Reprinted by kind permission of the interviewers.]

Noted science fiction author Joanna Russ is perhaps most famous for her provocative novels *The Female Man* (1975) and *We Who Are About To ...* (1977), and her 1983 Hugo Award-winning short story "Souls." Others know Russ primarily for her feminist criticism collected in works like *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts* (1985), and *What Are We Fighting For?* (1997). We, however, became interested in Russ because of her involvement in the early days of the Kirk/Spock slash fandom.

As feminists, academics, and slash fans we went in search of what had been written about this phenomenon—women writing sexually explicit, largely homoerotic stories about characters from film, television, and literature. What had others, particularly feminists, made of this? Russ, we found, wrote the first important feminist analysis of slash fiction. Her 1985 essay, "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love" helped to set the terms of the discussion for feminist scholars who followed, and it is widely cited in fan studies. Russ argues that fantasy has to be read in more complex ways than simply seeing it as an effort at one-dimensional wish fulfillment. She posits fantasy as something rich and metaphorical. She reads slash as a genre that tells us new things about women's sexuality and sexual desire, things that—in 1985—weren't being talked about except in the very divided feminist "sex wars," where "pro-sex" and "anti-porn" feminists created ever more polarized stances. We were especially intrigued by this passage from Russ's essay:

Only those for whom a sexual fantasy "works," that is, those who are aroused by it, have a chance of telling us to what particular set of conditions that fantasy speaks, and can analyze how and why it works and for whom. Sexual fantasy materials are like icebergs; the one-tenth that shows above the surface is no reliable indicator of the size or significance of the whole

thing. Sexual fantasy that doesn't arouse is boring, funny, or repellent, and unsympathetic outsiders trying to decode these fantasies (or any others) will make all sorts of mistakes. (89)

In the twenty-six years since her piece was published, the slash world has changed a great deal (as has the world of feminist analysis). Academic scholars from a variety of fields—including media studies, literature, history, and education—now examine fan fiction and slash fiction. Within the last decade scholarly texts and academic journals have considered the legality of fan fiction, have presented it as a space to explore girls' online cultures and literacy, have argued that fandom is a queer female space, and have questioned the dividing lines between pornography, erotica, and romance.

We wanted to talk Russ, to have her revisit this idea of sexual fantasy, to have her discuss the phenomenon of a community of women writing erotica for the pleasure of other women, and get her take on current efforts to "decode" slash and slash fans. Though she is a bit of recluse and has published little in recent years (she suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome), Russ graciously agreed to be interviewed at her home in Tucson. The following conversation took place in May 2007, in her living room, among her books, movies, and a largely ignored (though nonetheless cool) rocketship on a wooden base that turned out to be her Hugo award.

JR: I remember when I first got a phone call from a friend. She told me about slash, and I didn't get *mildly* interested, my hair stood up on end! I said "What? Can I get that?" "Yes," she said, "you can," and I began collecting them, and finally when the collection began to get utterly unwieldy and huge, I sent them to Bowling Green University, the Popular Culture Institute there. I wanted them to go somewhere they would last and not just be thrown out or whatever.

AP: Does that mean that you don't have your slash anymore?

JR: I don't have them with me, no. I have the few stories I wrote, copies of those, but that's it. I've found that because they're so erotic, after I finished one of them I would have this terrible thud as I came back to reality, and I decided I just didn't like that. So, sorrowfully, I sent them away, where they would be loved. I might think they are.

CF: We've been particularly interested in not only the slash stories women are writing but also the kind of community they're building around these stories and the kinds of bonding that they have been doing, and also the language that they have come up with to be able to talk about the bonding. The women in the various slash fandoms clearly think of this as a female community, as a place where women can come together, where we can bond, women can sort of express desires that they can't normally express.

JR: Oh yeah, they're very much aware of that. Some of them have to keep it secret that they read this stuff, certainly from their employers and often from their husbands. I think what happened, the way I have heard it, is that when *Star Trek* began, a lot of women who had not been interested in science

fiction came to be interested through it, although it really is not that much of a female fiction. And what happened was, I suspect, that the Trekkies, the Trek fans, started going to conventions. Now science fiction fans have always done that, but these were specifically Trek conventions, and they got together, they got to know each other. And [slash] began, and I think about that time there were stories hinting that [Kirk and Spock] were in love, and then there were stories about one of them having died and the other saying “Oh God, now I realize it, why didn’t I know it before,” and [these women] kind of got into the subject.

AP: One of the sets of questions that we have for you was about what the community of slash readers and writers was like before the internet. We can tell you some of what it’s like now, because now there certainly are still cons, but so much of the community is happening on the internet and it is very immediate.

JR: Yeah, I would think so. I don’t have much experience in that.

AP: Right, we didn’t think that you did, so we were going to show you some of what is going on now if you’re curious.

JR: I know that before, the science fiction fans—and there are always some women, not a majority, but quite a few—one of the things that motivated them, that probably still motivates the community, is that they feel very isolated. You don’t easily get in touch with people who are other fans. And every once in a while, I don’t know how many times in the past twenty years, maybe three or four times, I would get a letter addressed to my publisher saying, “Help! I am a science fiction fan and I am out here in nowhere land. I cannot find another fan, what should I do?” And usually what I tell them is get the magazines, because in the back they have announcements of cons, and go.

AP: So when you were reading slash, you found out that it existed because a friend of yours said “Hey, look at this thing that I found?”

JR: Yes.

AP: And did you go to cons?

JR: No, I didn’t. By then, the universities I was working for did not give out all that much money for travel. When they had I had gone to a lot of places, not SF cons, but I had all sorts of things going on, conferences about this, that, and the other, technology in the future, and who knows.

AP: So did you have other female friends who read and/or wrote slash?

JR: Only this one. I did write to several of the women whose stories were published, and one of them got to be quite a nice friend, and quite interesting. I don’t know where she is now, though, or what she’s doing. But no, I never really got into the community. There is a woman, an academic, who wrote a book about the community [Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1991)]. It’s not so much about the stories per se, although she certainly does a lot of that, it’s about the kind of people who are in the community and what they feel and what is the kind of

emotional center of the stories. I found it just fascinating.

AP: Is she coming at it from a feminist perspective?

JR: I think she gets to the center of the thing there. She’s interested in the topics, the themes they’re exploring, and it rang true to me, it really did. There was a guy in academia who did another book about it which is, I think, very schematic.

AP: Was it *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins?

JR: I think so.

AP: He’s actually come a long way since that book, but that has become a touchstone book in the field of fan fiction studies and fan scholarship more broadly. It’s a book that everybody refers to.

JR: It’s not nearly as good as this one [*Enterprising Women*], I think, not nearly. He’s somewhat schematic, and a little rigid. She’s not interested in that. She says at one point that the material is like the stories of King Arthur—many, many different writers saying many, many different things, but that’s all.

AP: Could we ask you some questions about writing slash? I know that you don’t do that now but in your essay “Pornography by Women for Women” you allude to the fact that you’re writing it, and we didn’t know if that was a literary device or if that was actually true.

JR: No, I actually did.

AP: We would love to hear about that, particularly because you are a professional writer.

JR: Some of the others are too. Don’t assume they’re not. One of them is a lawyer, as far as I know; one is living on disability and worked for a while as a social worker. They turn up all over the place, and there are all sorts of theories about why. I think, to put it in a nutshell as far as I can remember, they’re writing about issues that concern women very much, but they’re doing it undercover in a way. These [the characters the writers create] are sort of men but they’re not really, you know? So [the women writers] can treat things that they could not do at all.

CF: Did you enjoy writing slash?

JR: I don’t know, that brings up a question of writing, do I, quote, enjoy writing. In a way, yes, and in a way no. It’s very hard, I mean, it really is. On the other hand I liked it immensely. I’m never happier than when I’m sitting in a corner typing. Yeah, I enjoyed it.

CF: Was writing slash different in some way?

JR: Yes, there was one way in which it’s very, very different, and that is that the characters are givens. You don’t have to stop and say “oh, by the way, this character is so-and-so and had this sort of childhood and blah, blah, blah,” because everybody knows who they are.

CF: Some people argue that fanfic writers aren’t really writers or they can’t ever be very good writers because they’re just sort of playing in somebody else’s yard.

JR: Many of them, yes, that's true, but some of them are good writers. I don't know, it's hard to say. If you don't know the show, you can't really pick up what's going on, and that in a way makes it easier, that you don't have to create everything from scratch. The base, the foundation is already there. I couldn't talk about anybody else, but that's the way I felt, and it's kind of freeing in a way. It sort of is like talking about King Arthur and his knights; well you know who they are, come on, I don't have to tell you. Especially when you're writing science fiction, everything is new, and that's hard. And of course the other thing I think that got writers into [Star Trek] was that it's character-driven. It has ideas and it's character-driven. And that's Buffy too. What many of them do in other kinds of fan fiction is to say "you know all the public stuff, I'm going to give you their private lives, filling in what isn't there."

AP: Did you read any Buffy slash?

JR: No. I have been told it exists but I don't really feel that I'd want to. As I said, I'm too tired.

AP: Well, we brought you some Smallville slash, just in case you want to see it but you don't have to take it if it feels like that would be too much.

JR: Most of it is sort of pornography.

AP: Well, we definitely want to talk about that.

JR: If it doesn't turn you on, it's kind of indifferent.

AP: And that was one of the great points that you made in your essay about slash, the fact that people who don't get it, who are not turned on by it, are not the right people to criticize it because they're missing some crucial elements, and I thought that was exactly right.

JR: I think that applies to all kinds of fiction and all kinds of drama. If it doesn't affect you, then why read it?

AP: And are you going to be able to have really useful insights about how it does or doesn't work if it doesn't work on you? So were your slash stories sexy? I mean, your regular novels are sexy, did the slash allow you to be more explicit?

JR: Yes, and make my scenes longer. Yeah, it did I think. And yet there's a good deal of slash where that doesn't happen, but even there it's full of emotion and emotional intensity. I know from secondhand that many of the male fans of Star Trek who don't write this kind of thing were very offended by it. "That couldn't happen in a million years."

CF: Many male fans are still not just offended, but incredibly vocal and hostile to slash.

JR: "You're playing in my field, get out, take your little red wagon and go home." Yeah, something like that. I don't really know, apparently it's really threatening stuff.

AP: And what is the threat? I have thoughts, we have thoughts on why it is so threatening but ...

JR: Tell me your thoughts.

AP: Well, for one thing, I think part of what these slash sto-

ries are doing is making explicit a subtext that's already very much there, and so I think that is threatening; the fact that if we took off the blinders of heterosexism, the amount of homoerotic tension that is going on in mainstream American media all the time is incredibly visible. And slash makes it visible, and I think that's threatening.

JR: I think so.

CF: I think slash, too, makes visible female desire, and I think that freaks men out. Recently in the fangirl community someone had just read your *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, and she was very moved and excited, and she wrote this really long post about your book in relation to fanfic. The title of the post was "How Fanfic Makes Women Poor." She wrote this thing and basically what she said is that fanfic keeps women poor and silenced and marginalized because we are sort of over here doing our own thing out of the way and not competing in mainstream culture with men. And so regardless of what she actually said in the post, what it did is that all sorts of people came out of the woodwork to comment about fanfic, and why women do it and why they don't do it, and whether or not fanfic violates copyright law, and there have been weeks and weeks of this stuff, and "you didn't understand what Joanna Russ actually meant," and weeks and weeks of this stuff. And one of the posts that came out of it was by a male academic who thought that all of this uproar was completely silly, and discussed people who write fanfic, particularly people who write slash. He said that fanfic was horrifying and that fanfic writers were pathological, that fandom as practiced by women represents a regression to adolescent, juvenile, child-like modes of expression, and that fanfic writers were bad readers and demonstrated their childlike nature by being unable to engage. He even to some extent recognized the ways in which that critique was completely gendered, that here were a bunch of women doing a bunch of silly things, over in private, giggling, and that there was something deeply, deeply wrong about that, and that instead of doing that what we should be concerned with is creative art with a capital A.

JR: Oh, that again. That's an old one, oh my god, several centuries old. [Samuel] Delany once pointed out that in the nineteenth century the number, the amount of fiction written, began to just grow like crazy. And it got to the point where nobody could read all of it, and what happened was that it first split into two, there was high art and there was slush, so you knew what you should be paying attention to. Rider Haggard's book *She*, I don't know if you know the novel; it's a fantasy, it's the kind of thing that today if you saw it, it would have a swordsman and an incredibly buxom lady on the cover, and you'd say it's just trash. It is, actually, but he was considered absolutely on par with others. I mean, he might not be as good as they were, but this was serious fiction. And now we've been living with this split for so long, that that's the automatic thing you can defend yourself with. "Oh, but this isn't art, it isn't serious, it isn't real. It's juvenile." Anyway, I don't know. I hope there are a lot of young men growing up who don't hear of this and who don't think about it and won't do it anymore.

AP: I think that the value, the categories of evaluation that we so often use to say this is pornography, versus this which is art, are suspect at best. I also think those judgments tell us a lot more about the culture itself and its assumptions than they do about the works they judge.

JR: Yes, I would agree. You notice that some of the stuff by men that I would call certainly pornographic, Henry Miller, for instance, is taken very seriously. It's all so obvious. When women do it, it's silly, when men do it, it's serious.

AP: It's either silly or it's horrifying, you know? It's either "oh, that's trivial, we can laugh that off," or it's that this is deviant. I think slash is an interesting space to look at in terms of that, because it is so erotically-driven, it is so explicit, it is so sexy. I mean, to me, when you said "my hair stood up on end," that was absolutely my response when I started reading slash, it was like "oh my god." The first thought was "oh my god," and the second thought was "how have I gone this long without having read this stuff," you know? I think it's really interesting that this subculture of literature exists and is thriving, but I also think it raises a lot of questions about our culture and female desire, which of course is one of the big things you talked about in your essay in 1985. We wanted to talk to you about to what extent those things are still happening and still true today. Do you feel that our cultural approach or cultural understanding of female desire is about the same now in 2007 as it was in 1985?

JR: Well, it's a little different than it was in 1985. If I look really far back, yeah, a lot has changed, but it's weird, it's as if the guys are still running television and the movies, and they're trying very hard to keep it the way it was.

CF: Do you think that shows like *Buffy* and *Xena* make a dent?

JR: Yes, I think they do, and there's something interesting that a writer friend of mine, a man, told me; he lives in Pennsylvania I think. He said he and his wife went on a tour of one of the studios, and one of the things that they had for people, who were pretty largely young people and children, were two actors, a woman costumed as *Xena* and a man costumed as *Hercules*. He said the younger people were fascinated by *Xena* and they had lots and lots of questions, but they weren't terribly interested in *Hercules*. This is irrespective of the sex. I think this is because in the *Xena* shows there is a lot of emphasis on personal feeling, and motives, and things like that; it's character-driven again. I think some of them said they'd like to have a mother like *Xena*. I have been reading a lot of sludge, just stuff like collections of mystery stories and science fiction collections. The mystery stories are very interesting because again, often the ones that women write are as good as or not as good as the ones the guys write, but the women write about personalities, about characters, and what is character-driven. The men tend not to; they are more comfortable apparently with technical problems. I think the best writers are the kind who do both at the same time.

AP: Do you attribute this difference to just sort of continuing gender role socialization that puts women in the posi-

tion of being the caretakers?

JR: Well that certainly exists, and I don't know if it's quite enough to explain it, but it's a hell of a lot. I don't really trust biological research as it's going on now, because when it gets into the mass media, again, you have to get into new scholarly stuff before you find this, but if you have two groups of people and you're testing them for something, there's about a five percent chance that the results you get will just be chance. They're necessary because they're statistics, and yet when you see stuff in places like *Newsweek* or *Time* they're taking one-and-a-half percent, for instance, as being terribly important. I also happen to know again from some of these sources that articles and books which talk about how different men and women are get reviewed and get talked about. Those which don't come up with that just disappear. It's obvious that this culture is extremist on the subject.

AP: I have a whole unit in my Intro to Women's and Gender Studies course where we talk about that very issue because I think that that's incredibly true, that our culture loves to find biological justifications for gender-power differences.

JR: Every culture will find justification for everything they believe or want to believe. I still think that a lot of the world is still in shock, and I think probably what brought it on was easier birth control. The sort of, where are we, what do we do now?

AP: And our culture I think may be among that group.

JR: Oh yes, definitely.

AP: *Consuela* and I have been talking a lot about female desire and the fact that it seems to us that the lessons that we have been taught as girls and women about what desire was, what it meant, what it felt like, what shapes it took, that those lessons were all profoundly, profoundly wrong. In ways that as a thirty-four-year-old woman who has been a feminist for years and years, who teaches Women's Studies, I'm surprised at how surprising this is to me, because I should know this by now, but it's like, it's even more wrong than I thought. So I just think that our culture, that we don't know anything about female desire.

CF: And yet, here's this world of slash where this is all these women are doing, talking about it and asking questions.

JR: But they're in disguise. They're disguised as a man. I once noticed that in slash there are so many references to these characters' penises that it's like a little label that says "Hello, I am" and the name. "I have a penis and I'm therefore male," but clearly that's not what's happening.

CF: Why do you think that women can't have these conversations about their own desire through female characters?

JR: I think it's something like this. As I said, the characters are not exactly male. They're disguises of some sort, kind of like "I have the proper genitals so I am male, please remember that." I have written a couple of stories myself in which women are disguised, literally disguised as men. You try to write about women and you don't have the cultural tropes that you could

use, there's very little there. It's kind of like disguising yourself as an upper-class person, as an aristocrat. It counts, it matters that they're male. It makes what they do serious. Apparently the real message does get through, because you said a lot of the fans hate it. They don't think it's about men, they know better. [Writing about male characters] kind of frees your imagination or your memory or something. This had happened in the nineteenth century, quite a few women who were novelists would write stories about women who were disguised as men or they would write them from a male point of view, and that is saying "if I were only a man, I could do this or that, or be this or that." Some were not like that, there's an early detective novel, 1890 or something like that in which a young woman is a detective, and there's a lovely illustration from the first publications of this thing in a magazine then, and there she is with her skirts and her parasol and her hands are teeny. A drunken lout is about to hit a woman, and she is saying, "stop, sir," and she doesn't look as if she could hit a cream puff, but that's her. That did happen. But in many of them, no, it didn't.

I think [writing about male characters] has something to do with one's sense of oneself as an active person, as free. I mean, we have sense, we look around and we see those guys who are doing all sorts of stuff, even if they can't do it right, they're thinking about it. They're making fantasies about it, there are movies about it. So this becomes not only "we will show you the personal life of these people, which is left out of the mass media, but we will write about them as we know people on the inside, and they will ring true to us, to the writers and readers in a way they would not if they were women."

AP: And I guess that's the part that interests me and that I have not found an adequate explanation for. That reading the stories about Clark and Lex for instance, in the Smallville slash, is really sexy, I mean, that stuff is hot, and works for me in a way that the stories about the female characters in Smallville don't work at all. Is that some sort of compensatory thing, because my identity as a woman is not solid enough?

JR: No, I think that nobody's social identity as a woman is solid enough. And when you're doing this, you're inventing, you're fantasizing. It's still very much a different world for men and women. I remember somebody, a feminist at Cornell, once said to me, "I was talking to this audience and they were looking rather unconvinced, especially the guys, and then I said, how many people here put only their initials in the telephone listing in the telephone book?" And the women's hands all went up, and the men went, you do? They didn't know. They hadn't noticed. Yeah, they do. And that makes a big difference. It's like gay friends of mine who went to the March on Washington, and said we were all over the place, we got into a subway and it was nine-tenths gay people. And she said you don't realize what a burden you carry until it's gone. Everything just went, it was wonderful, and I think that's true whatever the burden is. Whatever the minority burden or the sex burden, whatever it is, when it's gone you go, oh my god.

AP: The social identity of a woman is such that sexual stories with women are not ...

JR: It's not real unless men do it, something like that, I think.

CF: And so do you think that this new generation, the next generation of women are continuing to write slash like the women who were writing before? So many of the people in the Smallville fandom, for instance, are college students, twenty-year-old girls, so their social identities [are also not well-formed]? We would like to think that a generation later ...

JR: It's less than it was, because when I was an adolescent which was in the 1950s, nobody would have imagined [slash], let alone written it. And that's why when Patricia, my friend, said it's a world in which Kirk and Spock are lovers, and I said, "Where do I find that?" I remember once I was having one of the [fanzines] duplicated, and the illustrations I had forgotten about, and I was there watching them do it in this Xerox place. This elderly man kind of stood next to me and he saw one of the illustrations, and he went gray—shocked, very shocked. Yet I took [these same pictures] to a feminist group and I remember one woman saying "I don't want to see that," and I showed it to her and she said, "they're not there for us, they're there for each other," which was very subtle, it was true, in the illustration.

AP: And yet I don't know that's true of the stuff that I read. In fact, I would say it's the exact opposite, that the characters are not there for each other, they're entirely there to create erotic bonds between the women who are writing and reading the stories. They're explicitly there for us.

JR: Yes, I would say so, yes.

AP: Not for each other.

JR: Yet the woman I heard this from, my friend, is definitely heterosexual, and she loves [slash] too. I think it's fairly flexible stuff. You don't have to identify with this character or that, you can do both or neither; writing can do that. It's only after thinking, like today, about this that I realize how male-identified most science fiction is, especially since I've been reading anything from the sixties on, in science fiction. It's that idea of disguise that I find myself coming back to. You can really, in a sense, be anybody or *anybodies*, plural, in writing. I used to write in the sixties, in the early sixties; I was writing stories, not science fiction then, in which the main characters were men. One day I sat myself down and began thinking, and I just tried to write a story about a thief and pick-pocket and that kind of person you keep finding in those books, who was female. I couldn't. And then I started writing and when I wrote I realized that it was a creation story, and the creation story for this particular world was that men were made from the sixth finger of the first woman, and that is why women only have five fingers on each hand. That worked, and suddenly I did this whole series about Alyx, but she is still an exception in that world. And by the time I got to *The Female Man*, they aren't, in the whole population.

AP: And yet, characters like Alyx, and characters like Janet, and Gyl, in *The Female Man* are not necessarily exceptions

now in that fictional world, but are still exceptions in the world of public discourse.

JR: That's a good phrase to think of when you're asking, why did they write about men? That's what we have in the public discourse. And in those terms, if you like things that go into those terms (which probably, obviously you do), that's what you have to do. Work in the public discourse's terms. Some [slash writers] I think have been drifting away from that, but as I said, I am way out of the loop now.

AP: Did you or do you see slash as potentially a kind of activist writing? Is it, for instance, a kind of writing that could challenge compulsory heterosexuality?

JR: The second thing, no, I don't think so; the first, maybe. I think the women who write it were, at least in the eighties, aware that they were doing something they probably should not tell people about, especially their employers. I remember Syn Ferguson, who is a good writer, saying to me at one point "my readers need this, they really need it, and I know women who are keeping this a secret from everybody, including their husbands."

AP: Why do they need it?

JR: Because, as you say, this is a public discourse in which female sexuality really doesn't exist. I lived that out. I can still remember riding in the subway at about the age of seventeen, and I remember thinking oh my god, sex is so common, it's all over the place. I didn't think it was because I learned what the movies taught me.

CF: Do you think that these women who are writing slash are doing a disservice by keeping it out of the public discourse? I think this is part of what that fury was about the woman who wrote about your book, that we're doing ourselves a disservice by keeping it secret. I write slash and I certainly don't publish it under my actual name.

JR: Most of the women don't, they write it under pseudonyms.

CF: Should we be? Should I go out tomorrow and publish it under my own name? Would that be better?

AP: Is the secrecy actually serving the interest of the patriarchy that wants to keep women's desire under wraps?

JR: It's probably doing both. I don't think you can separate the yes and the no on that, absolutely. Think of what it would do for you. What would be the consequences? I think that women who wrote it in the seventies and eighties had some idea of what they were doing, because I did see one group of slash writers in the eighties at a science fiction convention, and some guy came over and said "who are you?" which is a perfectly reasonable thing to do at a convention, and one of the women looked at him and said "we're a knitting society," or something along that line, and one of them called themselves the Women's Terrorist Society from Hell. Everybody laughed, and he laughed, but I think there was some truth to it. If you believe the public discourse then you have to also believe that female sexuality is a dreadful thing and must be

squashed at all costs, and so on. I just hope there are many, many more young people who are growing up without that, without all of it, anyway. I think that's true. Let me tell you an anecdote about that. When I was in my teens I do remember reading *Forever Amber*, which was the scandalous book of the time, and the sex scenes always ended with three or four dots. I got to the point where if I saw three or four dots, it would turn me on, and now you think of it and it seems so absolutely asinine, three dots.

AP: I do think that we're a lot more open about sexual desire in general, and female desire these days, but I think often female desire now is configured as something that is sort of a visible commodity for other people's consumption. The whole Girls Gone Wild phenomenon, that women are supposed to be sexy but not ...

JR: Sexy but not sexual.

AP: Right, it's not about what do you feel, it's about what do you perform.

JR: I think so too, I don't know what's going to happen with this. I would hope that the openness would leave a little more room. Some woman was commenting in somebody else's book about some event in her parents' group, where they went to see their daughters perform, and their daughters were imitating the sexy women from I forget where, and they were eleven and twelve. And the parents didn't like it and I thought I don't like it either. I really don't like it. This is not about being sexual. I don't know, I think it's a lot easier for men to find out who they are this way than it is for us, but still. One thing I have tried to do when I write, and Samuel Delany was clever enough to pick it up at one point, was take the sex in my stories and simply make it part of the whole fabric. It's not special, it's not sacred, it's not demonic, it just happens. It's as much an ordinary part of life as heating your dinner up, or something, and I always worked very hard to get that over. That's the antithesis, the three dots, I guess.

AP: Well right, because if something is so highly charged that you can't even write and you just have to put the three dots ...

JR: It's sacred and demonic.

AP: I think that's exactly right.

CF: Sam Delany said about science fiction that it was a rich symbiotic environment that talks about what you desire. Someone was asking him about sexuality in his work and whether he thought the genre of science fiction allowed him to play, and he said that there was something, not just about science fiction books, but about science fiction culture, about going to cons, and about that being a unique place in allowing people to articulate what they desire and what they fantasize about, whether or not it was something they would actually do, that this freed them up in a way.

JR: I think it's true. I remember talking to a young woman I knew when I was teaching in Seattle, who was a science fiction fan and I got to know a little group of fans there. She

at one point said she had been a Mormon, and was no longer, she insisted on being thrown out, and she said what began to free her in her life was science fiction. I said how do you mean, and she said not necessarily the characters, who were very recognizable, not necessarily the plots, which were sort of imperial America stuff, but she said the landscapes, and the aliens. They give the feeling that things could be different. I think it did that for me too, when I was a teenager, and that's why I held on to it so. Things could be otherwise.

AP: Which is a pretty radical notion.

JR: Yeah, it certainly is.

CF: Octavia Butler talks about the same thing in her interviews. About reading science fiction as a young kid and that what drew her to it was the possibility, even when the stories might have been hackneyed or imperial America, there was still something about it that suggested possibility.

AP: It seems to me that, and I don't know if there's anybody to quantify this, but the number of people who are writing fan fiction now, the number of people who are involved, for instance, in the Harry Potter fan community ...

JR: Yeah, that surprised me a little.

AP: It's stunningly large.

CF: Incredibly large, and active, and prolific.

AP: People just are writing novels and novels in response to these novels, and so it seems to me that although maybe it still feels subcultural for the people who are involved, it seems like it's got to be at some point, it's got to be less of one. Even though it's a secret, it can't be a subculture if it's the majority of people participating, right? It feels to me like maybe it's on this borderline of not being subcultural anymore.

CF: Yet we might be walking down the street with tons of people who are reading and writing slash, but they're publishing it under pseudonyms. So that even if it's this groundswelling stuff, it's still a secret.

JR: They've got to keep it secret because they're violating copyrights, and so are the others.

AP: Right, but that's another whole gendered issue that some folks have talked about, the fact that parody is looked on by the courts and by copyright-holders much more favorably than slash. So people who are writing parodies that aren't sexual, who are often men, are not as liable as people who are writing slash, who are usually women. So it's an interesting gendered thing about what's considered copyright violation and what isn't.

JR: There's something legal there, too, which is that parodies are making fun of the object, and they're not trespassing, really, on the same territory.

AP: Well, it's considered a First Amendment issue, which I think is right, but slash is not.

JR: It's serious, that's why.

AP: It's also, I think, because of all the stigma around women being into this dirty stuff.

JR: I know there are women, some have told me, who don't want to sign their names because they're quite sure they'd lose their jobs, and they might. It's a pity, it is a pity. And there is very explosive stuff in there, I know. And one of the reasons I gave my collection away is I was spending too much time and energy on it, and it costs a bundle.

AP: Well, this is a bad sign for us, Consuela. The fact that she's actually had to give it up, cause we have constant conversations about, is this bad that we're spending this much time reading slash?

JR: It wasn't a matter of it being objectively bad. It was that every time I finished a [fanzine], the exuberance would carry me across the apartment and then I'd go, oh no, it's over.

AP: And I think that may be one thing that's somewhat different with the internet communities, because now you finish the stories and you write to the author, and then you write to your girlfriend and you say "oh my god, go read this story," and then you excerpt, "here's a really sexy passage." This is what Consuela does to me all the time, "here's something really sexy," so that you won't be able to resist reading the story right now. And so it's sort of like, we don't have that *thud* because of the community.

JR: I know, the characters have sort of become community personas, and I did not have that.

AP: It would be a thud, I think, to finish the story and not be able to say "oh my god, Consuela, you have to read this."

And one of the things, too, that just reminds me of this that you mentioned in your "Pornography" essay, you said, "I mentioned just the premise of slash to eight women, and all of them shrieked," and I thought yes, there's something very true in that. I mean, obviously it's true because it was your experience, but there's something about the female community and the shrieking. Consuela and I have these conversations about how we feel like we have tapped into our fifteen-year-old selves, and the shrieking, and the delight.

JR: Possibly fourteen.

CF: And I think that part of the guy who called fanfic horrifying and pathological, I think in part that's what he's reacting to, because if you see one of the stories posted online and the comments that come after it, a lot of it is sort of shrieking with words, and this whole sort of fangirl language that has developed to communicate that shriek, but on the screen, and it is like we're fifteen years old, or fourteen.

JR: But we never got this when we were fifteen and fourteen, and that's the difference.

AP: Yeah, it feels like it's tapping into some, I mean, I've been using words like "unruly" and "insurgent" sort of energy in myself that got disciplined out of me when I was a teenager.

JR: It must be very different between you and me since

I was a teenager in the God/Elvis 1950s, and there are women now [writing slash] who are younger than you are, who are fourteen and fifteen. I don't know what I would do with that. I do know that in feminist writing there have been women writing books and things like that in which they recount what happened to them in their teens, and what it meant to them. What I think of the mystification I was exposed to, it was just hard. I'm seventy, but this must have started when I was eleven or twelve, being squashed. Somebody was saying that for gay women to come out, they usually do it a good bit later than gay men, because you can't get a picture of yourself at all, one way or the other.

AP: And that is one thing that I think, to a certain extent, I hope maybe has changed from when you were a teenager. I think at least teenage girls now, regardless of the distortions that our society puts around female sexuality, maybe know that having sexual feelings is a normal thing, and also I think know that gay and lesbian identities exist.

JR: That is where I think it's really big and different, a big difference.

Coda: After the interview concluded, we gave Russ some slash stories we had printed out for her. While at the time she seemed to accept them more out of a desire to be polite rather than a genuine interest in the love affair between Clark Kent

and Lex Luthor, those stories actually began a year-long correspondence with Russ. She wrote to us (in letters that she composed on the typewriter—she doesn't own a computer), commenting on the stories we'd given her and on slash and women and sexuality generally; we wrote back and sent more stories. When we met her she had opted out of the slash community (to a certain extent, she had never been part of that community), but we introduced her back into the community, and that community of female desire seemed to delight her as much as it has delighted us and other women who read and write slash in the communities that proliferate online today.

Russ is now 75 years old, but she is still a rigorous thinker—creative and critical—whose writings have been important to science fiction and feminism. Although we didn't agree with everything she said in our interview, we were struck by how thoughtfully she engaged with a world that she now mostly views from the outside. We also remain impressed with how relevant her writings still are. Although much has changed from the world she intervened in with her fiction and her critical essays, too much remains the same, and her arguments and visions—about women, about gays and lesbians, about a society that allows everyone the space to enact their full humanity—still need to be acknowledged.



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SCIENCE FICTION'S INVISIBLE FEMALE MEN: JOANNA RUSS'S "WHEN IT CHANGED" AND JAMES TIPTREE'S "THE WOMEN MEN DON'T SEE"

Marleen S. Barr

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I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you sometimes see in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

The two feminist science fiction stories I wish to discuss in this chapter concern protagonists of substance whose presence is distorted or made invisible because people refuse to see properly. The invisible man in Joanna Russ's "When It Changed" and James Tiptree's "The Women Men Don't See," however, cannot be categorized under the umbrella definition of the word *man*. In *The Female Man*, Russ challenges the supposition that *man* includes all human beings by arguing that *man* and *mankind* are improper synonyms for *person* and *human*. Joanna, one of Russ's protagonists, neatly explains:

"If we are all mankind, it follows to my interested and righteous and right now very bright and beady little eyes, that I too am a Man and not at all a woman, for honestly now, who ever heard of cave Woman and existential Woman I think I am a Man; I think you will ... employ me as a Man and recognize child-rearing as a Man's business I am man Listen to the female man.

"If you don't, by God and all the saints, I'll break your neck" (Russ, *Female Man*, 140).

According to Joanna's terms, Janet, the narrator of

"When It Changed" (which shares this narrator as well as its setting on the planet Whileaway with *The Female Man*), and Ruth Parsons, the protagonist of "The Women Men Don't See," are both female men. In this chapter I explore the worlds these female men inhabit. I illustrate how Russ and Tiptree create new feminist versions of old science fiction plot formulas, and I explain how they manipulate words to convey patriarchy's distortion of their female characters (and real women), how patriarchy routinely transforms women of substance into invisible female men.

Both stories open with the purposeful presentation of invisible women. When Tiptree's narrator, Don Fenton, first encounters Ruth Parsons and her daughter, Althea, he sees "a double female blur" (Tiptree, 176–77). Althea is individually described as "the near blur" (Tiptree, 177). Why does a feminist story open with a male narrator's description of two female blurs? Tiptree uses Fenton's male perspective to exemplify how men routinely erase individual women. Just to be fair, however, Tiptree admits that sometimes men do choose to see women quite clearly: "I [Fenton] see the girl [Althea] has what could be an attractive body" (Tiptree, 178). In order to be seen, a woman must be attractive.

Instead of creating a male narrator, Russ, in "When It Changed," chooses to distort the facts of women's lives by playing with our definition of specific words. She uses language to poke fun at immediate cultural responses. For example, when she begins the story with a description of an unnamed narrator's "wife" (Russ, "When It Changed," 227; unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent Russ citations refer to "When It Changed"), she wishes readers to assume that the narrator is male. She wishes readers to assume that the following sentence alludes to a divorce: "Katy [Janet's wife] and I [Janet] have three children between us, one of hers and two of mine" (Russ, 228). These conclusions are harmless enough, but not so for readers' mental picture of Janet's eldest child, who "dreams of love and war: running away to sea, hunting" (Russ, 228). Upon learning that these dreams are accomplished by someone called "she," readers are abruptly plunged into the world of Whileaway. That single personal pronoun signals that readers have a false view of the story's beginning, that they have fallen into Russ's prearranged linguistic trap. The glaringly inappropriate use of "she" announces that on Whileaway women have wives.

Like readers of both sexes, the male characters in Russ's story view the women of Whileaway in terms of figments of their imaginations. Even though these men take pains to emphasize the re-establishment of sexual equality on Earth, they still insist on falsely viewing Janet and Katy according to patriarchal conceptions of proper power relationships: "*Which of you plays the role of the man?* As if we had to produce a carbon copy of their mistakes! I [Janet] doubt very much that sexual equality has been re-established on Earth" (Russ, 238). These women—women who live in a society that does not include men—are expected to behave as if men are present. According to the male astronauts from Earth, their special status as independent female men is unimportant and unseen.

Ruth's and Althea's special characteristics are also irrelevant to Don. Don, accompanied by women who are willing to move beyond Earth's boundaries, cannot move beyond the

boundaries of his male ego. He insists on falsely defining and seeing the Parsons women. For example, he would like to have sex with Ruth's body even though he does not know or care about her. "The woman doesn't mean one thing to me, but ... the defiance of her little rump eight inches from my fly—four two pesos I'd have those shorts down and introduce myself" (Tiptree, 191). Ruth has designs on voyaging to the stars; Don speculates, "I wonder if Mrs. Parsons has designs on me" (Tiptree, 198).

When Don denies Ruth's agenda and her humanity, he acts according to a fundamental principle of our world: men are people and women are the Other, the invisible mistress, helpmate, wife, mother. Russ exemplifies this situation through the use of humor. Soon after arriving on a planet populated by women, the male astronaut asks, "Where are all your people?" (Russ, 231). When he looks at the inhabitants of Whileaway, he sees mere women, not people. Similarly, Don does not see Ruth as a person when he first meets her. In addition to treating her as a sex object, he believes he knows her because she can be defined as one of the army of faceless female government clerical workers: "Of course, I know her now, all the Mrs. Parsonses in records, divisions, accounting sections, research branches, personnel and administrative offices" (Tiptree, 185). Yet, in Don's eyes, Ruth can be separated from this female herd. He believes that she deserves to be seen because she is not ugly and not old: "Who was that woman ... who coped with my per diem for years? ... But dammit, Ruth is a lot younger and better looking. Comparatively speaking" (Tiptree, 197). This differentiation is temporary. All women face growing old—invisible, separate, Other.

Tiptree, like Russ, also uses humor to exemplify the distinction between *women* and *people*. She seems to say, Okay, if women aren't people, we should call them something else. So she invents science fiction's invisible female human opossum: "Think of us [women] as opossums, [sic] Don [says Ruth]. Did you know there are opossums living all over. Even in New York City?" (Tiptree, 205). In the manner of opossum, women must somehow survive by inhabiting unseen places within man's world: "What women do is survive. We live by ones and twos in the chinks of your world-machine"¹ (Tiptree, 205). It is sobering to realize that even though Whileaway is not a part of our world-machine, it too is yet another such chink.

Regardless of Janet's and Katy's independence, achievements, and good life—their substance—when men come to Whileaway Ruth's following words are applicable to its feminist utopian society: "Women have no rights, Don, except what men allow us. Men are more aggressive and powerful and they run the world. When the next real crisis upsets them, our so-called rights will vanish We'll be back where we always were: property" (Tiptree, 204). Janet is aware of the consequences of men's aggression and power, the truth of Ruth's statement: "Men are coming to Whileaway. When one culture has the big guns and the other has none, there is a certain predictability about the outcome I will remember all my life those people [Earth men] I first met who were muscled like bulls and who made me—if only for a moment—feel small" (Russ, 237). The men Janet describes are dangerous invading enemies. When men come to Whileaway, the rights of female men vanish. Earth

men define residents of Whileaway as adjacent, aberrant, not quite fully human—something Other than *man* and *people*. Janet realizes that her achievements will be distorted and that she will soon be analogous to a circus sideshow: "And I'm afraid that my own achievements will dwindle from what they were—to the not-very-interesting curios of the human race, the oddities you read about in the back of the book, things to laugh at sometimes because they are so exotic[,] ... charming but not useful. I find this more painful than I can say" (Russ, 238). I find the possibility of Janet—a proud, independent woman of achievement—becoming something freakish to be more painful than I can say.

I also find it painful to realize that "When It Changed" and "The Women Men Don't See" insist that women live better without men. Ruth does not reside with a man, and she gave birth out of wedlock. "There isn't any Mr. Parsons, Don. There never was" (Tiptree, 201–2). Her independence proves to be insufficient. Although her personal life does not include men, she is still desperate to escape from patriarchy. Her frantic attitude is justified because, despite her solitary, self-supporting existence, she is still not free. Don is even threatened by the amount of freedom she does possess: "A mad image blooms in my mind: generations of solitary Parsons women selecting sires, making impregnation trips" (Tiptree, 202). An even madder image bloomed in Russ's mind: generations of women who exist without men, who marry and give birth, and who live perfectly complete lives. "I miss nothing," says Katy (Russ, 235). Janet's daughter's reaction is less controlled. Her response after being asked whether she could fall in love with a man: "With a ten-foot toad!" (Russ, 238).

This child does not think that men are a part of her species. Further, according to her elders, men are rather analogous to rancid tuna fish salad: "They [men] are obviously of our species but *off*, indescribably *off*, and as my [Janet's] eyes could not and still cannot quite comprehend the lines of those alien bodies, I could not, then, bring myself to touch them I could only say they were apes with human faces" (Russ, 230). The word "alien" is all-important here. Russ revives the grand cliché of science fiction plot formulas, the alien encounter. Her feminist version of the alien encounter tale gives new meaning to common words. When human males are aliens in a feminist community, according to the residents of that community, females are defined as people and males become the Other.

Like Janet, Ruth also sees males as aliens, and like Russ, Tiptree uses the old alien encounter plot formula to make a new feminist point. When the spaceship lands, Don panics while Ruth remains calm: "'For Christ's sake, Ruth, they're *aliens!*'" "'I'm used to it,' she says absently" (Tiptree, 213). Ruth has been living with aliens throughout her life. For Ruth, males are aliens, and extraterrestrials are a source of salvation. Hence, according to Russ's and Tiptree's feminist version of the alien encounter, human males are the bug-eyed monsters. This is a fair fantastic reaction to our reality that routinely defines women as different, as the Other—as aliens.

Through the use of a new version of a worn plot formula, Russ and Tiptree turn the tables on language and create a fantastic situation where it is appropriate to define males, not females, as the Other. In terms of the title of Robin Lakoff's book,

they toy with our conceptions of language and women's place. Here is another example of Russ's response to sexist language: "Man" is a rhetorical convenience for 'human.' 'Man' includes 'woman.' Thus: 1. The eternal feminine leads us ever upward and on (Guess who us is)" (Russ, *Female Man*, 93).

Russ's ideas encourage a new reading of Tiptree's title. Since "men" does not really include "women," "The Women Men Don't See" can be read as "The Subhumans People Don't See." This title more explicitly points to the crippling impact of sexist language and patriarchy. On one level, Tiptree's story tells us that the women men don't see are those women who do not appear to be good sex objects. When the title is read in Russ's more direct terms, it announces the deeper meaning of the story: the difference between "women" and "people," the existence of invisible female men.

In Janet's society, men's superiority, their hegemony over all aspects of life, is irrelevant—"For-A-While" (Russ, 239). "When It Changed" takes place during a moment when men are absent and women are visible. How does its title reflect this fantastic occurrence? Does "When It Changed" refer to the time when men on Whileaway were killed by disease or to the time when men returned to Whileaway in the role of a disease that will infest a healthy society? Since the story does not specify which of these two interpretations is correct, I offer a third. I think "it" refers to the time when the universal masculine personal pronoun became an anachronism. Janet's following comment hints that "it" refers to language: "He turned his head—those words have not been in our language for six hundred years" (Russ, 230). The definition of "woman" changes in Russ's story. "It" refers to the temporary time when "woman" became a rhetorical convenience for "human." Sadly, after the men arrive, the people of Whileaway again become invisible female men. "He" will again supposedly include "she."

Ruth and Janet wish to be defined as people, to be seen correctly and clearly. They strive to be female men instead of invisible women. Don fails to understand why Ruth believes that an unknown world could be better than Earth: "How could a woman choose to live among unknown monsters, to say goodbye to her home, her world?" (Tiptree, 217). A feminist would answer his question with another question: How could a woman fail to take advantage of the opportunity to leave a world dominated by those who call her the Other, a world that is not her own? Ruth and Althea are not doing something that has not been done before. After all, Europeans who desperately desired to escape oppression entered ships bound for a new world. The Parsons women are journeying toward an unknown world that might possibly be a new nonsexist United States. They are attempting to create their own Whileaway. They hope the new world they encounter will be more effective than Whileaway. More specifically, if future "generations of solitary Parsons women" (Tiptree, 202) succeed in living decently and well away from Earth, unlike Janet and her fellows, may they manage to avoid an alien encounter with Earth men.

These stories do not give a positive account of relationships between women and men. They tell us that, under patriarchy, women of substance become analogous to opossum. Reality is more sobering than the texts, however. Real women cannot leave Earth permanently. Whileaway does not exist for

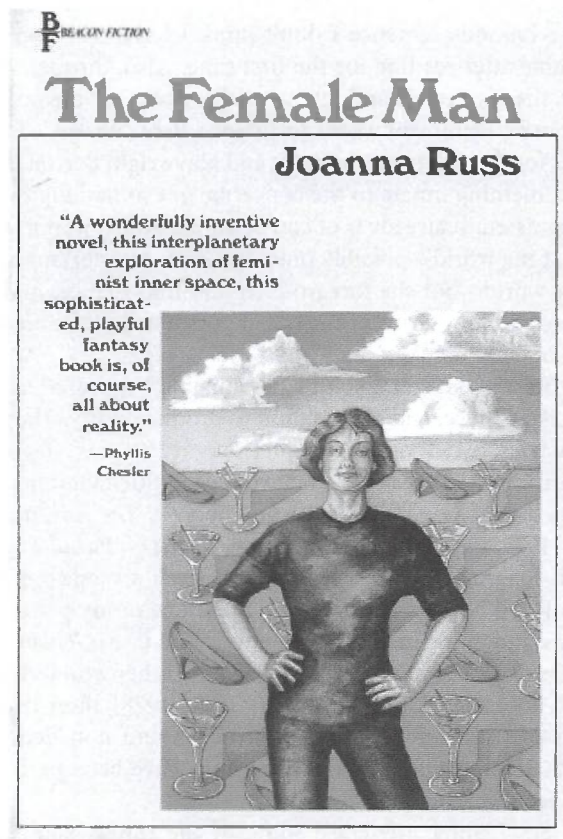
them. Real women have but one alternative: they must remain and fight to widen their particular chink in the male world-machine. They must remain and struggle to be seen.

Note

1. Tiptree's phrase "in the chinks of your world-machine" has resonated for critics of feminist science fiction. Sarah LeFanu named her book *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (London: Women's Press, 1988; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). Anne Cranny-Francis ended *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) by citing the phrase.

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JOANNA RUSS

Interviewed by
Samuel R. Delany

Interviewer's Note: What follows is excerpted from a telephone interview with Joanna Russ at WisCon 30, in May 2006, which was heard by a ballroom full of listeners. In a slightly different form, it was first published in WisCon Journals, I. Titles of works have been corrected for the benefit of readers; publication dates have been added to the first mention of works. [Reprinted by kind permission of the interviewer.]

Samuel R. Delany: In my humble opinion Joanna Russ is simply one of the most important writers who has written in the United States in the last fifty years. This is a writer who has produced works on the level of Willa Cather, James Joyce and William Gass. She writes, among other things, sentences that are absolutely spectacular. A description of a spaceship which I quote endlessly to my writing students at Temple University, in which she's describing a star-liner from her second science fiction novel, *And Chaos Died* [1975]: "The big one was the platonian idea of a pebble turned inside out, born of a computer and aspiring to the condition of mechanical opera." That is such a luscious sentence I don't think I have ever been quite the same after reading for the first time. Also, throughout her work, there's a range and intensity of concern for the problems of women. Feminism works for Joanna Russ the way Marxism works for the great German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht. It is something innate to the concerns, not something that can be dismissed. It already is of course an incredibly important aspect of the world—possibly one of the most important aspects of the world—but she foregrounds that importance, makes us understand it in terms of the social portraits that she creates in her work.

Russ's first story, "Nor Custom Stale," appeared in *F&SF* in 1959 I believe, and she went on to produce many other wonderful tales: "My Dear Emily," "I Thought She Was Afraid Till She Stroked My Beard" (such a wonderful title that it had to be changed to "I Gave Her Sack and Sherry"), *The Adventures of Alyx* [1975, including her first novel, *Picnic on Paradise*, 1968], which Joanna calls pre-feminist and I call an amazing set of tales; *We Who Are About To ...* [1977] one of my personal favorites; and more, including the novels *The Two of Them* [1978] and *On Strike Against God* [1980]. There is her wonderful children's book, *Kittatinny: A Tale of Magic* [1978], three beautiful books of stories, four books of criticism and non fiction—as well as some plays, which, though they have been performed, are uncollected.

So, Joanna, what are some of the things you've been thinking about lately?

Joanna Russ: I don't know if I can tell you. I'm still basking in all your praise.

SD: You deserve to bask. Tell us a little bit about where you're living. What is Tucson like?

JR: Tucson is getting to be a rather sprawling small city. Desert. Very hot in the summer. I just love it. Not the city so much, but the location and the skies. Oh, the skies, my friend: Yes, Tucson specializes in that!

SD: Can you say something about the "double bind situation"—the economic realities of a writer trying to write and make a living from it at the same time?

JR: Yes, it's awful. It's not the writers' fault. It's the economics of publishing now. What I've seen again and again is that a writer will do very fine early stuff—really good stuff—and say, "Okay, I can make a living writing." But they then find themselves having to work too fast. Words should not only be thought, they should be felt through, and there just isn't enough time. People in that bind never do great stuff again. And if you don't do that, if you say, "Okay, I will keep my day job (as they used to say in the theater), and I will just write what I damn well please," you end up working too hard.

SD: Yes, I can remember my first six books in three years, and I ended up spending the summer in a mental hospital. Any thoughts on changing it?

JR: No. I don't know, I think it is an industrial capitalist problem. It didn't use to be true. There were niche markets, eighty-five different little magazines and publishers all doing something different. A young man wrote to me and said he had read *Alyx* and liked it, and he read another book of mine and he was shocked and horrified to discover that it wasn't the same thing. I know that's funny but it's like the *Gor* series, the 56th book of the series; people will buy these things because they're familiar.

SD: What are some of the authors you find yourself returning to and reading, whether fantasy/sf or other genres?

JR: It's a mixed bag. In sf when I was younger I loved Heinlein because he was always doing something different, and the sf didn't disappear after the beginning of the book; it was carried through all the way. I go back to some of Clarke's short stories, and Chaucer, frankly.

SD: Yes, you've always talked about Chaucer; he comes up again and again. What interests you about a classical writer like Geoffrey Chaucer?

JR: He has written some of the most perfect short stories in English, if you can think of Middle English as English. The three men who go out to kill Death is absolutely a smashing thing; the shape of the story is perfect. "The Pardoner's Tale."

SD: I'll go back and take a look at that one. Any other writers you find yourself returning to, to give you solace or what-have-you?

JR: Well, some of the feminists. The Chalice and the Blade, which has marvelous early Christian writing in it. Actu-

ally I don't read nearly as much as I used to. It's very annoying to have to get up every twenty minutes, and ... wait a minute, there's a punch line. I found that, after having a VCR for several years, you can treat TV just as a book. And now I have a DVD player. I have been going mad about Buffy. [*much applause from audience*]

SD: You have a lot of friends.

JR: I'm glad of that. Even though Buffy was created by a guy, it was one of those TV shows aimed directly at women, and it is not domestic, but adventurous, horror fiction, as well as comedy; and it's very well written, I'll say. A feminist friend of mine wrote me from Philadelphia and said, "You have to watch this." And I did and I loved it. I collected them on VHS tapes and now I've bought them on DVD. And some of the things they talk about are extremely funny.

SD: When we were talking about things to talk about, you mentioned general problems of growing older as something we all do.

JR: That struck me, among other things because I have arthritis and chronic fatigue syndrome; and I have begun to understand the kind of writers who write about limitations and mortality. I don't have the books with me—I forgot to bring them into the bedroom—but there are at least two for writers. One of them was Sarah Orne Jewett.

SD: *The Country of the Pointed Firs* ...?

JR: She has this sense of her characters, and she doesn't condescend to them, which I love. Just when you think you can look down on them, they are smarter than you are. She wrote one story called "The Hiltons' Holiday," which is almost heart-breaking because it's such a perfect day and it will never be repeated. I can't tell you the story because I will start sobbing if I try to.

SD: Are you particularly interested in Jewett, because of how she deals with age?

JR: Not just age. She deals with limitations of all kinds—mortality in particular.

SD: How do you experience limitations of old age? I'm 64 and can't do what I used to do before.

JR: I'm 69 and can't do what I used to do before. I thought I would put up signs around the house that said, "You are 70. Stop it!" [*audience laughs*]

SD: What about some of the fantasy stories that you have read? You mentioned Terri Windling's fantasy collection and you had some thoughts you had about that.

JR: I think a lot of very fine fantasy is being written. I don't mean unicorns and warlocks, but fantasy that works its way into ordinary life ... a kind of vitality there that I don't know if it's also in science fiction. See, I have been out of the loop for a long time, but I know that some of these fantasy stories are just thrilling.

SD: Yes, there is a feeling that some of the energy that was in

sf for a long time may have moved over to fantasy. It makes it a very interesting field.

JR: Yes, thinking about your tales of Neveryon. Boy, does that resemble Tolkien.

SD: What else has been going on in your life of interest?

JR: Mostly I have to keep about taking care of my body and keeping it functional and so forth—something I didn't used to have to do. I do trunk exercises in the morning and hip exercises in the afternoon. Ah, very boring, they really are, but they work, they do good things, so I keep doing them. There gets to be a point in your social life ... is much more with doctors than anyone else.

SD: I gather you're not doing much writing.

JR: I'm not doing any—haven't been doing any for ten years.

SD: Can you talk about the transition from someone who is writing to someone who is not?

JR: I found out once I got CFS [chronic fatigue syndrome] that writing takes an enormous amount of energy. It takes concentration, and this is a physical thing. I always used to wonder why, when I finished writing, I was so tired. I was only sitting down and writing. But now I can't concentrate long enough to do this, and I can't keep a whole thing in my head at the same time. If you're writing a novel, you're keeping stuff in the back of your head for a year or two, and it's very difficult to find suddenly you can't do that. It took about—oh let's see—eight or nine years for me to live with that comfortably.

SD: It's something that one way or another every writer will eventually have to go through.

JR: I find that the real solution is to be very self-indulgent. Really. Go to thrift shops, read books, watch TV, talk to your friends.

SD: Do all those fun things that you weren't doing.

JR: Yes, when you were too busy.

SD: At one point you said sf was a religious literature. Can you comment on that?

JR: Well, there's the old phrase—I don't know if it's still current—'sense of wonder.' The sense of wonder or awe at the hugeness of the universe. It comes up all sorts of places. *The Nine Billion Names of God* by Arthur C. Clarke, or *2001*. The protagonists tended to turn into the new messiah on the last page.

SD: Yes, that's a fairly common trope, we say in sf.

JR: Yes, it was a feeling of awe and wonder and gorgeousness and complexity.

SD: There are many moments in your own fiction when this kind of thing happens, certainly spectacularly presented in language. Toward the end of *We Who Are About To ...* when the protagonist is starving herself to death and she has a vision of agape, hears the music of the spheres—she's never

experienced them before at that intensity.

Thinking of comments from your writing that stuck with me, one of them, related to *Souls*, that extraordinary novella about a medieval convent run by the abbess Radagunda, which is besieged by Norse Vikings, and she saves the place more or less, or makes several attempts to save the people; the abbess, it turns out, has to get in touch with her inner alien—as it were. One night she’s musing in her inner monologue, the people want religion that gives and gives but the true god is a god who takes and takes—who takes until there is nothing left *but* god! That was very powerful when I first read it, and it remains powerful for me today.

JR: I’m temperamentally an atheist, with no religion. One of the things I loved when I found it in college was information about Taoism. They are mystics. When I was in my 30s and I was teaching at the University of Seattle one summer—the science fiction course I taught there you know about, and the writing course—I got to talking to one of the students who was also very much into this kind of thing, and we drove several people nuts because we were saying things that were paradoxes, contradictions, and one of them said that cannot be. And I got him in a corner—and pulled his hair!

SD: Sometimes you have to do that.

JR: But mystics have always talked in contradictions. A man—an Asiatic—who wanted to be a shooter of golden arrows went to see the greatest of these, where he lived at the top of a mountain. He was first told you must look at very, very big things until they seem small. Then you must look at very, very small things until they seem big. And coming back to the guy’s hut, the other guy who wanted to be a great bowman, or whatever, had left his arrows leaning against the hut, and the old man looks at them and says, “Oh! Now, what are those?” It always gives me chills. It’s the part where you know something so well and so completely, but in an odd way you can’t even talk about it. This is what was driving him nuts. Science fiction does this so well—like the end of Arthur C. Clarke’s *Childhood’s End*—mystics do so well. The whole earth becomes light in the end.

SD: It was Willa Cather who said that most literary writers get all the material that they’re going to write about by the time they are eight years old. And I’ve always thought that this is one of those things that alternate between seeming absurd, and seeming insanely true. Do you have any thoughts about that? Do you think the same age range applies to science fiction?

JR: No. You learn a great deal by eight or nine, but you’re always putting other things in as you get older. I don’t know if this happens in other literature, but it does happen in sf.

SD: If all literature is in a sense the literature of childhood, then I think that sf is the literature of adolescence.

JR: Yes, I’ve heard that from you before.

SD: In your adolescence, you were a Westinghouse Science Talent winner—in high school. Can you tell us about the project that won?

JR: My dad built a long box for me with lights at the top and I grew a fungus in each compartment. And each compartment light had a different gel with colors: red, blue, white, and completely dark. The fungus produced different kinds of spores and produced them in different patterns, depending on the light. *Aspergillus janus*, Janus being the two-faced ancient Roman god of the beginning of the year—two faces, one of future and one of past.

SD: Did you ever use that sort of thing in stories?

JR: I didn’t. By the time I finished I thought it was terribly boring.

SD: A story of yours I’ve always been very fond of is one called “Gleepsite.” Basically a large winged creature hovers outside a window made of—do we actually learn what “gleepsite” is in the story?

JR: No, it’s not in the story. It’s only the title. “Gleepsite” was an imaginary material made up by a Cornell architectural student. Whenever you had a problem you couldn’t solve, we said make it a gleepsite and change whatever variable you had. The story is, in a way, about fantasy in which fantasy becomes real.

SD: “Gleepsite” is a great story and a great title. Are there any tales of yours you find yourself still particularly fond of?

JR: It’s hard to say—things change as time goes by. I will say this, I read over most of them, and I think they were pretty good. I have a few of those where I read them and I think, “Did I write that?” I have a few of those—but not many.

SD: I think they’re pretty good, too. You’re one of the writers I go back to read, again and again. Can we talk about your novels? I know you don’t talk much about your second novel, *And Chaos Died*.

JR: Yes. I’m embarrassed by it. Lots of stereotyped ideas about gay men. That didn’t come to me until later. Marge Piercy put her finger on it when she said if you think of the gay man as a woman, it makes sense.

SD: Those things don’t bother me personally nearly as much today as they did when the book first came out.

JR: Yes, because the whole social surround has changed so much.

SD: The result is that there are astonishing passages, which come pell-mell, one after another, all through the book despite anything you might raise an eyebrow at—all sorts of wonderful things. You say it embarrasses you. Are there any parts you like?

JR: Yes. I think the protagonist and one of the women are walking through the countryside—and I think the description of the countryside is very good.

SD: Yes, some of the transition scenes—when I read them, today, my jaw drops even if I’m not in agreement with what Jai Vhed is transitioning from and to. It’s great writing. Also a poignant sympathy for the young manifests itself in many

of your tales. In particular “The Second Inquisition,” or your story of the young lesbian girl in *The Female Man*, they wring your heart out. Certainly they wrung *my* heart out. Is there any special relationship between either of them and your own life?

JR: Yes, I think so. A little later than that, but also in that time, I was discovering what they sometimes call the child within. And I discovered that I have one. I think everybody does. This is not a separate personality; it’s a kind of different personality, and she insists that she is the Empress of the Universe. Then, if she gets in trouble, she comes and hides behind me and I have to take care of it.

SD: That’s your description of the young woman in “The Second Inquisition,” the last novella in *The Adventures of Alyx*. I’m trying to remember the epigraph to that story; something like ... if you can survive the opinions of the people in the small town in which you live, you can survive anything. At least that’s what I took away from it.

JR: I did put a lot of autobiographical detail in that story: the town, the backyard, the little sort of couch or swing they sit on, stuff like that. The dance. All comes from stuff I’ve seen or lived through.

SD: That stuff feels incredibly real. It has that ring of truth, or as I described once in a piece of critical writing, it’s not the ring of truth; it’s truth’s bong, peel, and clang—the whole gamelan of truth sounding at once!

JR: When I got sick and couldn’t, I felt very bad about not writing. The only thing I could do was finish the book *What Are We Fighting For?* [1997], which I’d started much earlier.

SD: You did a good job.

JR: Well, I’m beginning to be self-indulgent as I said. I like it.

SD: I don’t know why I found myself rereading of all people Plato recently, and discovering that his idea of what education was for, was to make your own world interesting to you.

JR: The more education you get, the more interesting everything becomes. I don’t know how long it took me or you to decide that the double-bind in science fiction was economic, but I didn’t know that in my 20s. I hadn’t had that experience.

SD: But there is the one you did go through. Maybe you can give me some advice because I haven’t figured it out. How do you write and teach at the same time?

JR: You write and teach at same time by getting very tired. In a way I did do it and in a way I didn’t. In my 20s I was a junior teacher; I was an instructor, and that meant that I didn’t go to meetings and didn’t have any voice in the department, but it was great because I had lots of time and energy. But as I got older and my rank increased, I had less time. In my 50s, if I got an idea for a story or a novel I’d say, “Oh god, not again. I can’t.” But I would write, and the consequences were that people were always remarking I was not coming to meetings, and not having enough honor students or advisees. I would just look sort of pathetic and say, “Oh yes, I’m trying.” But I wouldn’t do it.

SD: That’s probably what you have to do. You have to break down and take the time for yourself, which is hard to do if you’re a labile, friendly, genial sort of person.

JR: Which I was not. I think what I did very self-consciously was teach the same kinds of classes all the time—creative writing classes all the time—so I didn’t have to develop them from scratch.

SD: My greatest failing is that I *do* want to teach new things—new classes, new works—all the time. Now, however, I just want to think.

[Question from audience]: You mentioned that your opinions of gay men used to be very different and traditional. I was wondering if your opinions of transsexual women have changed since you wrote *The Female Man*.

JR: Oh yes, oh yes, it’s almost as if my life has arranged itself to disabuse me of one prejudice after another. And all of these have gone because none of them were real, really.

[Question from audience]: Would you comment on the state of feminism today?

JR: I don’t really know enough about it to comment. I’ve been out of the loop, except for Buffy, for at least ten years now, so probably I shouldn’t say anything.

SD: I’ve been pushing your books at various people for many years. Which book would you like me to push first? How would you like your works to be introduced to people?

JR: I think you would have to decide what kind of people they are and what would not repel people, but would pull them in.

SD: And I think that’s what any writer would say. May I offer my own prejudices, as someone who teaches Joanna’s work again and again? I’d say younger and less sophisticated readers really enjoy *The Adventures of Alyx*; more sophisticated readers like the more sophisticated books such as *We Who Are About To ...*, *The Female Man*, and *The Two of Them*—and don’t forget *On Strike Against God*, which, though it isn’t science fiction, is quite as good as any of the others.

[Question from audience]: What do you think of the progression of the situations you described in *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* [1983], and do you think it’s getting better?

JR: Oh boy. Again, I really have been out of touch. I have the impression that, yes, it’s getting better.

SD: Let me offer my two cents as someone in academe. What seems to be happening is that to make room for women writers is that notion of “The Great Writer” and “The Great Tradition” “he” produces, themselves have to be dismantled.

JR: Well that’s a great thing ... It takes at least two generations to make an artist. In my case, maybe three.



TOWARDS AN AESTHETIC OF SCIENCE FICTION

Joanna Russ

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Is science fiction literature?

Yes.

Can it be judged by the usual literary criteria?

No.

Such a statement requires not only justification but considerable elaboration. Written science fiction is, of course, literature, although science fiction in other media (films, drama, perhaps even painting or sculpture) must be judged by standards other than those applied to the written word.¹ Concentrating on science fiction as literature, primarily as prose fiction, this paper will attempt to indicate some of the limitations critics encounter in trying to apply traditional literary criticism to science fiction. To be brief, the access of academic interest in science fiction that has occurred during the last few years has led to considerable difficulty. Not only do academic critics find themselves imprisoned by habitual (and unreflecting) condescension in dealing with this particular genre; quite often their critical tools, however finely honed, are simply not applicable to a body of work that—despite its superficial resemblance to realistic or naturalistic twentieth-century fiction—is fundamentally a drastically different form of literary art.

Fine beginnings have been made in the typology of science fiction by Darko Suvin² of McGill University, who builds on the parameters prescribed for the genre by the Polish writer and critic, Stanisla[w] Lem.³ Samuel Delany, a science-fiction writer and theorist, has dealt with the same matters in a recent paper concerned largely with problems of definition.⁴

One very important point which emerges in the work of all three critics is that standards of plausibility—as one may apply them to science fiction—must be derived not only from the observation of life as it is or has been lived, but also, rigorously and systematically, from science. And in this context “science” must include disciplines ranging from mathematics (which is formally empty) through the “hard” sciences (physics, astronomy, chemistry) through the “soft” sciences (ethology, psychology, sociology) all the way to disciplines which as yet exist only in the descriptive or speculative stage (history, for example, or political theory).

Science fiction is not fantasy, for the standards of plausibility of fantasy derive not from science, but from the observation of life as it is—inner life, perhaps, in this case. Mistakes

in scientific possibility do not turn science fiction into fantasy. They are merely mistakes. Nor does the outdated of scientific theory transform the science fiction of the past into fantasy.⁵ Error-free science fiction is an ideal as impossible of achievement as the nineteenth century ideal of an “objective,” realistic novel. Not that in either case the author can be excused for not trying; unreachability is, after all, what ideals are for. But only God can know enough to write either kind of book perfectly.

For the purposes of the aesthetics of science fiction, a remark of Professor Suvin’s made casually at the 1968 annual meeting of the Modern Language Association seems to me extremely fruitful. Science fiction, said Suvin, is “quasi-medieval.” Professor Suvin has not elaborated on this insight, as he seems at the moment more concerned with the nature of science fiction’s cognitive relation to what he calls the “zero world” of “empirically verifiable properties around the author.”⁶ To me the phrase “quasi-medieval” suggests considerable insight, particularly into the reasons why critical tools developed with an entirely different literature in mind often do not work when applied to science fiction. I should like to propose the following:

That science fiction, like much medieval literature, is *didactic*.

That despite superficial similarities to naturalistic (or other) modern fiction, the protagonists of science fiction are always collective, never individual persons (although individuals often appear as exemplary or representative figures).

That science fiction’s emphasis is always on *phenomena*—to the point where reviewers and critics can commonly use such phrases as “the idea as hero.”

That science fiction is not only didactic, but very often awed, worshipful, and *religious* in tone. Damon Knight’s famous phrase for this is “the sense of wonder.”⁷ To substantiate this last, one needs only a head-count of Messiahs in recent science fiction novels, the abrupt changes of scale (either spatial or temporal) used to induce cosmic awe in such works as Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men*, James Blish’s *Surface Tension*, stories like Isaac Asimov’s “Nightfall” and “The Last Question,” Arthur C. Clarke’s “Nine Billion Names of God,” and the change of tone at the end of Clarke’s *Childhood’s End* or Philip José Farmer’s story “Sail On! Sail On!” (The film *2001* is another case in point.)

The emphasis on phenomena, often at the complete expense of human character, needs no citation; it is apparent to anyone who has any acquaintance with the field. Even in pulp science fiction populated by grim-jawed heroes, the human protagonist, if not Everyman, is a glamorized version of Super-everyman. That science fiction is didactic hardly needs proof, either. The pleasure science fiction writers take in explaining physics, thirtieth-century jurisprudence, the mechanics of teleportation, patent law, four-dimensional geometry, or whatever happens to be on the tapis, lies open in any book that has not degenerated into outright adventure story with science-fiction frills.⁸ Science fiction even has its favorite piece of theology. Just as contemporary psychoanalytic writers cannot seem to write anything without explaining the Oedipus complex at least once, so science fiction writers dwell lovingly on the time dilation consequent to travel at near light-speed. Science is to science fiction (by analogy) what medieval Christianity was to deliber-

ately didactic medieval fiction.

I would like to propose that contemporary literary criticism (not having been developed to handle such material) is not the ideal tool for dealing with fiction that is explicitly, deliberately, and baldly *didactic*. (Modern criticism appears to experience the same difficulty in handling the 18th century *contes philosophiques* Professor Suvin cites as among the ancestors of science fiction.) Certainly if one is to analyze didactic literature, one must first know what system of beliefs or ideas constitutes the substance of the didacticism. A modern critic attempting to understand science fiction without understanding modern science is in the position of a medievalist attempting to read *Piers Plowman* without any but the haziest ideas about medieval Catholicism. (Or, possibly, like a modern critic attempting to understand Bertolt Brecht without any knowledge of Marxist economic analysis beyond a vague and uninformed distrust.)

An eminent critic (who knows better now) once asked me during a discussion of a novel of Kurt Vonnegut's, "But when you get to the science, don't you just make it up?" The answer, of course, is no. Science fiction must not offend against what is known. Only in areas where nothing is known—or knowledge is uncertain—is it permissible to just "Make it up." (Even then what is made up must be systematic, plausible, rigorously logical, and must avoid offending against what is known to be known.)

Of course didactic fiction does not always tell people something new; often it tells them what they already know, and the re-telling becomes a reverent ritual, very gratifying to all concerned. There is some of this in science fiction, although (unlike the situation obtaining in medieval Christianity) this state of affairs is considered neither necessary nor desirable by many readers. There is science fiction that concentrates on the very edges of what is known. There is even science fiction that ignores what is known. The latter is bad science fiction.⁹

How can a criticism developed to treat a post-medieval literature of individual destinies, secular concerns, and the representation of what is (rather than what might be) illuminate science fiction?

Science fiction presents an eerie echo of the attitudes and interests of a pre-industrial, pre-Renaissance, pre-secular, pre-individualistic culture. It has been my experience that medievalists take easily and kindly to science fiction, that they are often attracted to it, that its didacticism presents them with no problems, and that they enjoy this literature much more than do students of later literary periods.¹⁰ So, in fact, do city planners, architects, archaeologists, engineers, rock musicians, anthropologists, and nearly everybody except most English professors.

Without knowledge of or appreciation of the "theology" of science fiction—that is, science—what kind of criticism will be practiced on particular science fiction works?

Often critics may use their knowledge of the recurrent and important themes of Western culture to misperceive what is actually in a science fiction story. For example, recognizable themes or patterns of imagery can be insisted on far beyond their actual importance in the work simply because they are familiar to the critic. Or the symbolic importance of certain material can be mis-read because the significance of the material in

the cultural tradition science fiction comes from (which is overwhelmingly that of science, not literature) is simply not known to the critic. Sometimes material may be ignored because it is not part of the critic's cognitive universe.

For example, in H.G. Wells's magnificent novella, *The Time Machine*, a trip into the 8000th century presents us with a world that appears to be directly reminiscent of Eden, a "weedless garden" full of warm sunlight, untended but beautiful flowers, and effortless innocence. Wells even has his Time Traveler call the happy inhabitants of this garden "Eloi" (from the Hebrew "Elohim"). Certainly the derivation of these details is obvious. Nor can one mistake the counter-world the Time Traveler discovers below-ground; a lightless, hellish, urban world populated by bleached monsters. But the critic may make too much of all this. For example, Bernard Bergonzi (I suspect his behavior would be fairly typical) overweights Wells's heavenly/demonic imagery.¹¹ Certainly *The Time Machine's* pastoral future does echo a great deal of material important in the Western literary tradition, but it is a mistake to think of these (very obtrusive) clusters of Edenic-pastoral/hellish imagery as the "hidden" meaning of Wells's Social Darwinism. On the contrary, it is the worlds of the Eloi and the Morlocks that are put in the employ of the Social Darwinism, which is itself only an example of mindless evolution, of the cruelty of material determinism, and of the tragic mindlessness of all physical process. The real center of Wells's story is not even in his ironic reversal of the doctrine of the fortunate fall (evolution, in Wells's view in *The Time Machine*, inevitably produces what one might call the unfortunate rise—the very production of intelligence, of mind, is what must, sooner or later, destroy mind). Even the human devolution pictured in the story is only a special case of the iron physical law that constitutes the true center of the book and the true agony of Wells's vision. This vision is easy to overlook not because it is subtle, indirect, or hidden, but because it is so blatantly hammered home in all the Time Traveler's speculations about evolution and—above all—in a chapter explicitly entitled "The Farther Vision." As Eric Bentley once remarked, "clarity is the first requisite of didacticism."¹² Didactic art must, so to speak, wear its meaning on its sleeve. *The Time Machine* is not about a lost Eden; it is—passionately and tragically—about the Three Laws of Thermodynamics, especially the second. The slow cooling of the sun in "The Farther Vision" foreshadows the heat-death of the universe. In fact, the novella is a series of deaths: individual death (as exemplified by Weena's presumed death and the threat to the Time Traveler himself from the Morlocks) is bad enough; the "wilderness of rotting paper" in the Palace of Green Porcelain, an abandoned museum, is perhaps worse; the complete disappearance of mind in humanity's remote descendants (the kangaroo-like animals) is horrible; but the death of absolutely everything, the physical degradation of the entire universe, is a G[ö]tterdämmerung earlier views of the nature of the universe could hardly conceive—*let alone prove*. As the Time Traveler says after leaving "that remote and awful twilight," "I'm sorry to have brought you out here in the cold."

Unless a critic can bring to *The Time Machine* not only a knowledge of the science that stands behind it, but the passionate belief that such knowledge is real and that it matters, the critic had better stay away from science fiction. Persons to

whom the findings of science seem only bizarre, fanciful, or irrelevant to everyday life, have no business with science fiction—or with science for that matter—although they may deal perfectly well with fiction that ignores both science and the scientific view of reality.

For example, a short story of Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Masters” (in *Fantastic*, Feb. 1963), has as its emotional center the rediscovery of the duodecimal system. To criticize this story properly one must know about three things: the Arabic invention of the zero, the astounding importance of this invention for mathematics (and hence the sciences), and the fact that one may count with any base. In fact, the duodecimal system, with its base of 12, is far superior to our decimal system with its base of 10.

A third example of ways science fiction can be mis-read can be provided by Hal Clement’s novel, *Close to Critical*. The story treats of an alien species inhabiting a planet much like Jupiter. Some psychoanalytic critic, whose name I have unfortunately forgotten, once treated material like this (the story was, I think, Milton Rothman’s “Heavy Planet”) as psychoneurotic, i.e. the projection of repressed infantile fears. And certainly a Jovian or Jovian-like landscape would be extremely bizarre. Clement’s invented world, with its atmosphere 3000 times as dense as ours, its gravity three times ours, its total darkness, its pine-cone-shaped inhabitants, its hundred-foot wide “rain-drops” that condense at night and evaporate each morning, can easily be perceived by the scientifically ignorant as a series of grotesque morbidities. In such a view *Close to Critical* is merely nightmarish. But to decide this is to ignore the evidence. Clement’s gas-giant is neither nightmarish nor grotesque, but merely accurate. In fact, Mr. Clement is the soberest of science fiction writers and his characters are always rational, humane, and highly likeable. The final effect of the novel is exactly the opposite of nightmare; it is affectionate familiarity. The Jovian-like world is a real world. One understands and appreciates it. It is, to its inhabitants, no worse and no better than our own. It is, finally, beautiful—in the same way and for the same reasons that Earth is beautiful. *Close to Critical* evokes Knight’s “sense of wonder” because it describes a genuinely possible place, indeed a place that is highly likely according to what we know of the universe. The probability of the setting is what makes the book elegant—in the mathematical sense, that is: aesthetically satisfying. If there is anything grotesque in Clement’s work, it is in the strain caused by the split between idea-as-hero (which is superbly handled) and the human protagonists, who are neither interesting, probable, nor necessary, and whose appearance in the book at all is undoubtedly due to the American pulp tradition out of which American science fiction arose after World War I. The book suffers from serious confusion of form.

Science fiction, like medieval painting, addresses itself to the mind, not the eye. We are not presented with a representation of what we know to be true through direct experience; rather we are given what we know to be true through other means—or in the case of science fiction, what we know to be at least possible. Thus the science fiction writer can portray Jupiter as easily as the medieval painter can portray Heaven; neither of them has been there, but that doesn’t matter. To turn from other modern fiction to science fiction is oddly like turning

from Renaissance painting with all the flesh and foreshortening to the clarity and luminousness of painters who paint ideas. For this reason, science fiction, like much medieval art, can deal with transcendental events. Hence the tendency of science fiction towards wonder, awe, and a religious or quasi-religious attitude towards the universe.

Persons who consider science untrue, or irrelevant to what really matters, or inimical to humane values, can hardly be expected to be interested in science fiction. Nor can one study science fiction as some medievalists (presumably) might study their material—that is, by finding equivalents for a system of beliefs they cannot accept in literal form. To treat medieval Catholicism as irrelevant to medieval literature is bad scholarship; to treat it as somebody else’s silly but interesting superstitions is likewise extremely damaging to any consideration of the literature itself. But non-scientific equivalents for the Second Law of Thermodynamics or the intricacies of genetics—or whatever a particular science fiction story is about—will not do, either. Science bears too heavily on all our lives for that. All of us—willy-nilly—must live as if we believed the body of modern science were true. Moreover, science itself contains methods for determining what about it is true—not metaphorically true, or metaphysically true, or emotionally true, but simply, plainly, physically, literally true.

If the critic believes that scientific truth is unreal, or irrelevant to his (the critic’s) business, then science fiction becomes only a series of very odd metaphors for “the human condition” (which is taken to be different from or unconnected to any scientific truths about the universe). Why should an artist draw metaphors from such a peculiar and totally extra-literary source? Especially when there are so many more intelligent (and intelligible) statements of the human condition which already exist—in our (non-science-fiction) literary tradition? Are writers of science fiction merely kinky? Or perverse? Or stubborn? One can imagine what C.P. Snow would have to say about this split between the two cultures.

One thing he might say is that science fiction bridges the two cultures. It draws its beliefs, its material, its great organizing metaphors, its very attitudes, from a culture that could not exist before the [I]ndustrial [R]evolution, before science became both an autonomous activity and a way of looking at the world. In short, science fiction is not derived from traditional Western literary culture and critics of traditional Western literature have good reason to regard science fiction as a changeling in the literary cradle.

Perhaps science fiction is one symptom of a change in sensibility (and culture) as profound as that of the Renaissance. Despite its ultra-American, individualistic muscle-flexing, science fiction (largely American in origins and influence)¹³ is nonetheless collective in outlook, didactic, materialist, and paradoxically often intensely religious or mystical. Such a cluster of traits reminds one not only of medieval culture, but, possibly, of tendencies in our own, post-industrial culture. It may be no accident that elaborate modern statements of the aesthetic of the didactic are to be found in places like Brecht’s “A Short Organum for the Theatre.”¹⁴ Of course, didactic art does not necessarily mean propaganda or political Leftism. But there are similarities between Samuel Delany’s insistence that modern

literature must be concerned not with passion, but with perception,¹⁵ Suvin's definition of science fiction as a literature of "cognitive estrangement,"¹⁶ George Bernard Shaw's insistence on art as didactic, Brecht's definition of art as a kind of experiment, and descriptions of science fiction as "thought experiments."¹⁷ It is as if literary and dramatic art were being asked to perform tasks of analysis and teaching as a means of dealing with some drastic change in the conditions of human life.

Science fiction is the only modern literature to take work as its central and characteristic concern.

Except for some modern fantasy (e.g. the novels of Charles Williams) science fiction is the only kind of modern narrative literature to deal directly (often awkwardly) with religion as process, not as doctrine, i.e. the ground of feeling and experience from which religion springs.

Like much "post-modern" literature (Nabokov, Borges) science fiction deals commonly, typically, and often insistently, with epistemology.

It is unlikely that science fiction will ever become a major form of literature. Life-as-it-is (however glamorized or falsified) is more interesting to most people than the science-fictional life-as-it-might-be. Moreover, the second depends on an understanding and appreciation of the first. In a sense, science fiction includes (or is parasitic on, depending on your point of view) non-science fiction.

However, there is one realm in which science fiction will remain extremely important. It is the only modern literature which attempts to assimilate imaginatively scientific knowledge about reality and the scientific method, as distinct from the merely practical changes science has made in our lives. The latter are important and sometimes overwhelming, but they can be dealt with imaginatively in exactly the same way a Londoner could have dealt with the Great Plague of 1665 ("Life is full of troubles") or the way we characteristically deal with our failures in social organization ("Man is alienated"). Science fiction is also the only modern literary form (with the possible exception of the detective puzzle) which embodies in its basic assumptions the conviction that finding out, or knowing about something—however impractical the knowledge—is itself a crucial good. Science fiction is a positive response to the post-industrial world, not always in its content (there is plenty of nostalgia for the past and dislike of change in science fiction) but in its very assumptions, its very form.

Criticism of science fiction cannot possibly look like the criticism we are used to. It will—perforce—employ an aesthetic in which the elegance, rigorousness, and systematic coherence of explicit ideas is of great importance.¹⁸ It will therefore appear to stray into all sorts of extra-literary fields, metaphysics, politics, philosophy, physics, biology, psychology, topology, mathematics, history, and so on. The relations of foreground and background that we are so used to after a century and a half of realism will not obtain. Indeed, they may be reversed. Science-fiction criticism will discover themes and structures (like those of Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*) which may seem recon-dite, extra-literary, or plain ridiculous. Themes we customarily regard as emotionally neutral will be charged with emotion. Traditionally "human" concerns will be absent; protagonists may be all but unrecognizable as such. What in other fiction

would be marvelous will here be merely accurate or plain; what in other fiction would be ordinary or mundane will here be astonishing, complex, wonderful. (For example, allusions to the death of God will be trivial jokes, while metaphors involving the differences between telephone switchboards and radio stations will be poignantly tragic. Stories ostensibly about persons will really be about topology. Erotics will be intracranial, mechanical [literally], and moving.)¹⁹

Science fiction is, of course, about human concerns. It is written and read by human beings. But the culture from which it comes—the experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and learning which one must bring to it—these are not at all what we are used to as proper to literature. They may, however, be increasingly proper to human life. According to Professor Suvin, the last century has seen a sharp rise in the popularity of science fiction in all the leading industrial nations of the world.²⁰ There will, in all probability, be more and more science fiction written, and therefore more and more of a need for its explication and criticism.

Such criticism will not be easy. The task of a modern critic of science fiction might be compared to the difficulties of studying Shakespeare's works armed only with a vast, miscellaneous mass of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, a few remarks of Ben Jonson's, some scattered eulogies in Richard Burbage, Rowe's comments on *Othello*, and a set of literary standards derived exclusively from the Greek and Latin classics—which, somehow, do not quite fit.

Some beginnings have been made in outlining an aesthetics of science fiction, particularly in the work of Lem and Suvin, but much remains to be done. Perhaps the very first task lies in discovering that we are indeed dealing with a new and different literature. Applying the standards and methods one is used to can have only three results: the dismissal of all science fiction as non-literature, a preference for certain narrow kinds of science fiction (because they can be understood at least partly in the usual way), or a misconceiving and misperception of the very texts one is trying to understand. The first reaction seems to be the most common. In the second category one might place the odd phenomenon that critics inexperienced in the field seem to find two kinds of fiction easy to deal with: seventeenth century flights to the moon and dystopias. Thus *Brave New World* and *1984* have received much more critical attention than, say, Shaw's late plays or Stapledon's work. The third category has hitherto been rare because academic consideration of science fiction has been rare, but it could become all too common if the increasing popularity of college courses in the subject is not accompanied by criticism proper to the subject. Futurologists, physicists, and sociologists may use science fiction in extra-literary ways but they are not literary critics. If the literary critics misperceive or misconceive their material, the results will be to discourage readers, discourage science fiction writers (who are as serious about their work as any other writers), destroy the academic importance of the subject itself, and thus impoverish the whole realm of literature, of which science fiction is a new—but a vigorous and growing—province.

NOTES

1. "Environments" and similar examples of contemporary art seem to lend themselves to science fiction. For example, as of this writing, an "archeological" exhibit of the fictional Civilization of Llhuros is visiting our local museum. Strictly speaking, the exhibit is fantasy and not science fiction, since the creator (Professor Norman Daly of Cornell University) makes no attempt to place this imaginary country in either a known, a future, or an extraterrene history.

2. See particularly "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," *College English* 34 (1972): 372-382.

3. For example, "On The Structural Analysis of Science Fiction," *SFS* 1 (1973): 26-33.

4. "About Five Thousand One Hundred and Seventy-Five Words," *Extrapolation* 10 (1969): 52-66.

5. At least not immediately. Major changes in scientific theory may lead to major re-evaluation in the fiction, but most science fiction hasn't been around long enough for that. I would agree with George Bernard Shaw that didactic literature does (at least in part) wear out with time, but most science fiction can still rest on the Scottish verdict of "not proven."

6. Suvin (Note 2), 377.

7. Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder* (2nd edn 1967). The phrase is used throughout.

8. From time to time what might even be called quasi-essays appear, e.g., Larry Niven, "The Theory and Practice of Teleportation," *Galaxy*, March 1969.

9. A dictum attributed to Theodore Sturgeon, science-fiction writer, is that 90% of anything is bad.

10. As of this writing, SUNY Binghamton is presenting a summer course in science fiction taught by a graduate student who is—a medievalist.

11. Bernard Bergonzi, *The Early H.G. Wells* (1961), 52ff.

12. Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker* (New York 1967), 224.

13. Kingsley Amis emphasizes that 20th-century science fiction is predominantly an American phenomenon: *New Maps of Hell* (New York 1960), 17 (or Ballantine Books edn, 17), q.v.

14. In *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (New York 1962), 179-205.

15. In a talk given at the MLA seminar on science fiction, December 1968, in New York.

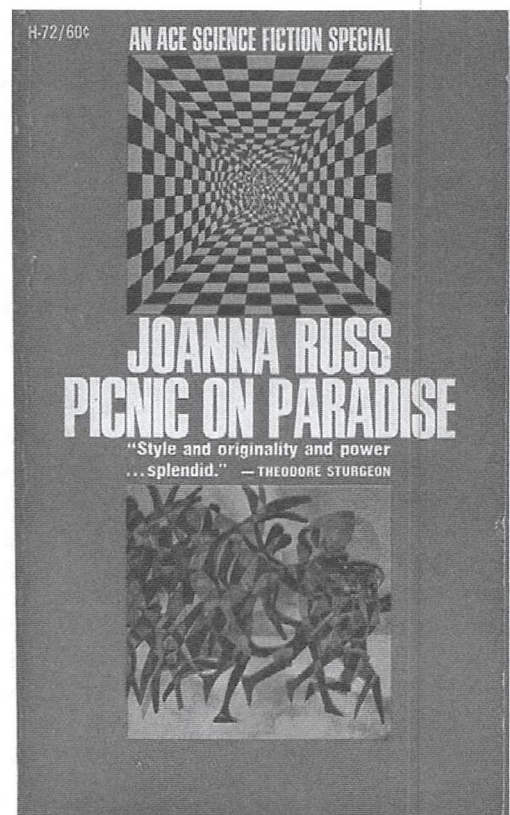
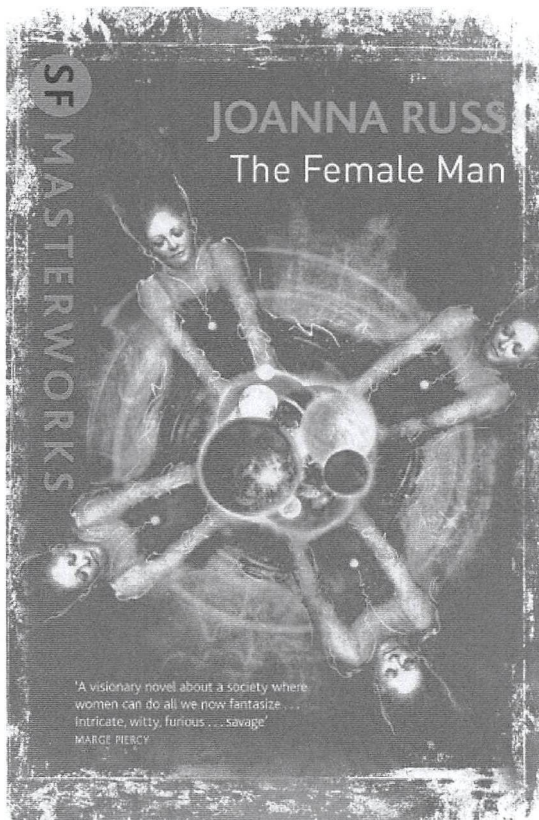
16. Suvin (Note 2), 372.

17. This phrase has been used so widely in the field that original attribution is impossible.

18. Suvin (Note 2), 381, as follows: "The consistency of extrapolation, precision of analogy, and width of reference in such a cognitive discussion turn into aesthetic factors ... a cognitive—in most cases strictly scientific—element becomes a measure of aesthetic quality."

19. In turn, James Blish's *Black Easter* (which I take to be about Manicheanism), Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (the Martian invasion), A.J. Deusch's "A Subway Named Moebius" (frequently anthologized), and George Zebrowski's "Star-crossed" (in *Eros in Orbit*, ed. Joseph Elder, 1973).

20. Suvin (Note 2), 372.



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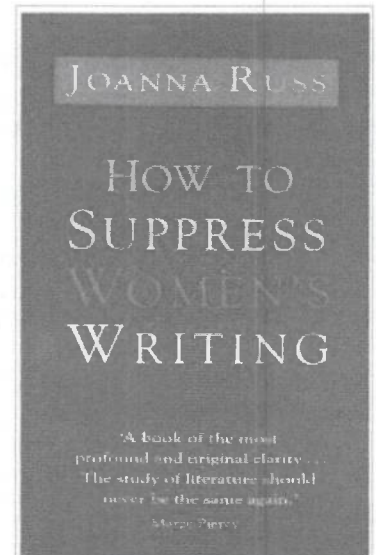
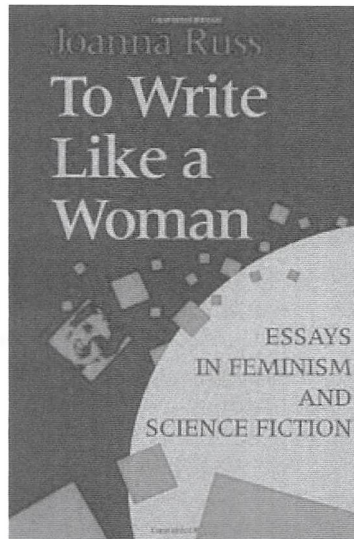
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Mildred Clingerman



Mildred Clingerman ca. 1959. Photograph taken by family friend Ed Cole, courtesy of Kendall Faye Burling.

MEMORIES OF MY MOTHER

Kendall Faye Burling

My mother, Mildred Clingerman, was a writer, and quite a good one! Because she was my mother, after all, and I took her for granted, as all children do with their mothers, the writer was much less important to me than her as a mother. As a child, I believed her to be the most beautiful, loving, and most important person in my life and in the world. I always knew, however, that she was somehow different than any of the mothers of my friends. She was a writer! No one else had a mother who was a writer. I remember the long days of the hot summers in Tucson, Arizona, where lived in a small house on the south side of town. My brother, Kurt, and I played outside in the desert heat and I remember my mother writing. And when she did, she was quite inattentive to our activities. Of course, we took full advantage of that! I remember her standing at the kitchen sink staring out the window with her hands in the dishwater, not moving, not talking, just staring. We knew that she was writing. She moved through household tasks in a sort of trance, smiling and looking at us if we spoke to her, but doing so in a distracted, not-really-listening manner. We loved it! While she was in her “writing mode,” we could roam the neighborhood at will and even swim in our grandparents’ pool without permission.

I remember that, at times, she felt the need to write for money. We were certainly not poor, exactly, but I know my parents struggled to afford my piano lessons and visits to the orthodontist. She would say, “I am going to try to sell a story to pay for ...,” or “maybe I can sell this story and we can ...” And, I remember the first time “Minister Without Portfolio” was sold. It was so exciting! I have no memory of the amount of money she earned, but I don’t think it was much. Short stories, particularly fantasy/science fiction stories, did not earn very much for their authors. When the anthology *Cupful of Space* was published, she was paid, I think, \$600. She cashed the check and spread out six one-hundred-dollar bills on the coffee table and said, “Now we can buy a car!” I had never seen that much money! It was glorious. I think they spent that money on a Chrysler sedan. My brother would remember this more clearly, maybe. I don’t know what they were driving before that wonderful moment.

We had interesting guests at our house. I remember her first agent, Barthold Fles. I cannot remember the country where he and his family came from, but I know that his mother was taken away by the Nazis. His wife’s father escaped the Nazis, perhaps from Poland, and wrote a book about his experiences in New York as an immigrant. Fles was married to a woman named Ruth who was a modern dancer. I was a kid, of course, but I sensed that Bart Fles was in love with my mother. She was so beautiful. He and Ruth visited often from New York and spent long afternoons in our living room drinking coffee and

talking. Somehow their author-agent relationship grew sour, and I don’t remember why. The reasons may be in some of the letters she wrote to her friend Olive. I simply cannot remember. Another guest I remember well was Anthony Boucher, the editor of the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* during those years. I remember him taking off his shoes and pacing back and forth in our small living room, smoking and talking. Everyone smoked, of course, so there was always a blue haze hovering in the air. When he came to Tucson to visit, he always stayed at the Santa Rita hotel in downtown Tucson. When I was in high school, I was in a “Maid of Cotton” beauty pageant, and my mother and I used his hotel room as a dressing room. He was quite taken with the contest, taking great interest in all the preparations. He attended the contest at the University of Arizona auditorium and was furious that I didn’t win!

My mother was brilliant, well-read, extremely liberal in her politics, and may even have been in some small way psychic. This side of her nature comes clear to me in her stories. She insisted that her children attend college. It was simply understood in our family that my brother and I would receive an education. We both graduated from the University of Arizona, and I went further, earning master’s degrees in communication and English from the University of Kansas, and Sul Ross State University, respectively.

When she talked to me about writing, she always said that it was very hard work, and that she really didn’t like it very much, but felt compelled to do it! She was frustrated, at times, by her inability to devote more of her time to writing. She was a housewife and mother of the 1940s and ’50s with all those limiting expectations. I always thought that, if she really worked at it, she could have been very famous. Her work was that good. We are, however, so wonderfully fortunate to have what we have of her. My favorite of her stories are “Wild Wood” and “The Day of the Green Velvet Cloak.” The “Wild Wood” still scares me and I think of it each year at Christmas time.

I am sorry she is gone. She would have been so proud of me, my brother, our children and grandchildren. She really left me in 1985, after a series of strokes that led her slowly into a terrible dementia, eventually ending her life in 1996. I miss her very, very much, and still can find her voice and face in her work.



MILDRED CLINGERMAN

Lisa Yaszek

When the editors of this Readercon Souvenir Book asked me to write an essay on Mildred Clingerman to commemorate her 2014 Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award, I jumped at the chance to do so. I personally discovered Clingerman when designing my first science fiction class as a junior faculty member at Georgia Tech. While browsing the Institute's excellent science fiction collection, I came across the seventh volume of editor Anthony Boucher's *The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Most of the male authors featured in that volume were familiar names: Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, James Blish, Poul Anderson, etc. But I was surprised to see a significant number of female writers also included in that volume, none of whom I had even heard of before. Even more surprising was the fact that Boucher dedicated the entire anthology to one of these writers: Mildred Clingerman, whom he described as one of his "most serendipitous discoveries."

The Clingerman story featured in Boucher's anthology is "The Wild Wood," which relates the tale of a housewife driven insane by both the demonic alien-turned-Christmas-tree-store-owner who assaults her each holiday season and her family, who ignores our heroine's frantic requests to shop elsewhere because it would spoil their holiday tradition. After reading Clingerman's tale, I knew I had to learn more. The story we tell all too often about science fiction is that while there have always been a few intrepid women in the field like Mary Shelley and C.L. Moore, the genre was mostly about "boys and their toys" until the advent of an overtly feminist science fiction in the 1960s and '70s. So who was Mildred Clingerman and how did she get the idea to write about women's subjugation by men a decade before the revival of feminism in America? Was this story included in Boucher's anthology because it

was unusual, or because it was an exemplar of some form that had been popular in its day and then lost to literary history? As the research that culminated in my book *Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women's Science Fiction* revealed, the latter was indeed the case. Between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s, nearly 300 women made their name in the genre community as authors of domestic science fiction. Domestic science fiction is a form of speculative storytelling that capitalized upon postwar ideas concerning women's work as wives and mothers, using the setting of home and the drama of family relations as focusing lenses through which to critically assess the most pressing scientific and social relations of midcentury America. And Mildred Clingerman, it turns out, was a true master—or, more accurately, mistress—of the form.

Mildred Clingerman (1918–1997) was born Mildred McElroy in Allen, Oklahoma. Her family moved to Tucson, Arizona in 1929, where she graduated from Tucson High School and attended the University of Arizona. She married contractor Stuart Clingerman in 1937 and had two children with him. During World War II, Clingerman worked at a flight training school. Afterward, she relinquished her job to focus on homemaking and writing. Clingerman sold her first science fiction story, "Minister Without Portfolio," to Anthony Boucher at the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 1952 and was strongly associated with that magazine throughout her career. While she was best known for her work in fantasy and science fiction, Clingerman also published in slick literary magazines including *The Atlantic* and *Collier's* and in women's magazines including *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman's Home Companion*. Additionally, she was the founder of the Tucson Writers Club, served on the board of the Tucson Press Club, and taught at the University of Arizona. Most of Clingerman's stories are collected in the 1961 anthology *A Cupful of Space*, and her stories have appeared in science fiction anthologies including *Portals of Tomorrow* and *Stories for Tomorrow* and in literature textbooks for middle- and high-school students.

As the author of exquisitely crafted domestic science fiction stories, Clingerman was very much part of her literary

and cultural moment. As science fiction scholar John Clute explains, her stories "tend to wed a literate tone" to subject matters that seem banal but turn out to be momentous. Her fiction was and still is often grouped with that of authors such as Richard Matheson, Ray Bradbury, and other well-known writers who contributed to *The Twilight Zone*; indeed, in many ways her writing anticipated the explosion of magic-realist and slipstream fiction just a few decades later. While Clingerman's style may not have been particularly gendered, the content of her stories was decidedly so. Two of her most famous tales, "The Wild Wood" and "A Red Heart and Blue Roses," revolve around the lives of married women who are quite literally driven insane by the human and alien men who harass them. As such, her stories dramatize the dilemma of housebound postwar American women described so poignantly by Betty Friedan in her groundbreaking feminist treatise, *The Feminine Mystique*.

However, Clingerman also imagined that women confronted with the fantastic might find within themselves inner resources that allow them to change themselves and their worlds. For instance, "Day of the Green Velvet Cloak" and "Winning Recipe" relate the adventures of mousy women whose encounters with time-traveling strangers and clever machines give them the courage to stand up to the domineering men in their lives, while "First Lesson" and "The Little Witch of Elm Street" celebrate the possibility of women connecting across generational and class lines as they grapple with fantastic events that threaten to destroy their families. Likewise, "Minister Without Portfolio" revolves around the adventures of an old woman who is dismissed as useless by her own family, but who turns out to be the key to saving humanity from a disastrous alien invasion. Taken together, such stories critically engage midcentury America's most dearly held beliefs about the relations of science, society, and gender, thereby anticipating the feminist critiques of patriarchy that would become central to women's speculative writing practices just a few years later. They also demonstrate how authors such as Clingerman ensured women's place in the future imaginary by making issues of marriage, motherhood,

and domesticity central to the narrative scenarios of science fiction itself.

Clingerman's contemporary Judith Merrill once claimed that she started writing science fiction because it was "virtually the only vehicle of political dissent" available to socially-conscious authors working in a historical era marked by political paranoia and cultural conservatism. Clingerman seems to have been driven by a similar impulse, and she often used her chosen genre for overtly political ends. This is particularly apparent in her 1957 short story, "Mr. Sakrison's Halt," a seemingly innocuous time-travel romance that becomes a biting indictment of racism in midcentury America. Published at the height of the midcentury civil rights movement—three years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and two years after the Montgomery bus boycott—"Mr. Sakrison's Halt" begins, in good domestic SF fashion, with a romance between the southern belle Mattie Compton and the northern liberal Mr. Sakrison. Although she initially dismisses him as a "Yankee beast," Miss Mattie soon falls in love with the gentle man and his vision for a better world: "I'd never heard anybody speak so sadly about the nigras He put words to the little sick feelings I'd had at times, and I began to catch his vision." The young couple decides to migrate north and marry, but their plans collapse when their train makes an unexpected stop in an unnamed town where beautifully dressed people of all races live together in prosperity and harmony. Mr. Sakrison immediately gets off the train and is welcomed by a distinguished-looking black man; Miss Mattie, overcome by a flash of prejudicial anger and fear, hangs back—and promptly loses her chance for happiness when the train starts up and barrels on without her fiancé. As a kind of penance, Miss Mattie spends the next forty years of her life riding the Jim Crow cars of the same train, desperately searching for the mysterious town where her beloved vanished. Here then, the failed romance between Clingerman's protagonists is both a direct result and reflection of the disastrous divide between blacks and whites marking American history.

This is not, however, the whole story. The narrator of "Mr. Sakrison's Halt" is an anonymous young woman born

in Miss Mattie's hometown but raised in the north. To counteract the hostility she feels as an outsider when visiting her birth-town, the narrator makes friends with the only other person in town who does "too much traveling around": Miss Mattie. In contrast to the other town-folk, Clingerman's narrator does not simply dismiss Miss Mattie's tale as the product of a lovesick mind; accordingly, she is given the privilege of witnessing its final act. During their last train ride together the narrator spots the mysterious stop that Miss Mattie has described so many times before. This time Miss Mattie does not hesitate to get off the train, and she is rewarded with the return of both her youth and Mr. Sakrison. Thus it would seem that with patience and continued communication between women alienated from their own worlds, there might be a future in which love—between individuals and between races—could prevail.

Again, however, this is not the entire story. Miss Mattie and her lover are only reunited in a magical, alternative America that the narrator glimpses but can never find for herself again, trapped as she is in a world of "firey crosses" and white-supremacist rage. The narrator's closing observation underscores the difference between these two worlds:

The Katy local was retired years ago. There's a fine high-way now to the city I hear everything has changed. But I read in my newspaper last week how they've locked the doors to the schoolhouse and barred with guns and flaring anger the way to the hill, and I realize how terribly far [my birth-town] still is from Mr. Sakrison's halt.

More than mere apocalyptic imagination, this final image encapsulates some of the most dreadful newspaper headlines of Clingerman's day: after all, "Mr. Sakrison's Halt" appeared in print the very same year that President Dwight Eisenhower sent out the National Guard to ensure the integration of Little Rock Central High School (and Arkansas's governor shut down the entire state school system in retaliation). And much the same thing can be said of Clingerman's entire story. With all its twists and turns, the narrative structure of "Mr. Sakrison's Halt" closely mirrors the complex and sometimes contradictory hopes and fears

attending the dream of racial justice in America. Although Clingerman's narrator—and by extension, her readers—might have been able to catch glimpses of the brave new world imagined by civil rights activists and their sympathizers, in the American South of 1957 it might well have felt like that dream was still almost impossibly far away.

I want to conclude this essay by noting how very appropriate it is to celebrate Mildred Clingerman's accomplishments at a convention that has chosen Joanna Russ as its memorial guest of honor. Russ's own first published science fiction stories—"Nor Custom Stale" and "My Dear Emily"—were very much experiments with the kind of domestic science fiction popularized by Clingerman and her peers. And so when she began to forge a canon of feminist science fiction distinct from midcentury women's speculative fiction that, as she noted, featured excellent character development but all too often left its female protagonists stranded in what she called "galactic suburbia," she did so not out of disdain for her literary predecessors, but out of experience ("The Image of Women in Science Fiction"). While Russ clearly preferred the more overtly feminist science fiction that she and her own cohort were crafting, the fact that she recognized there might be other modes of speculative fiction by women with their own literary and political agendas is itself an important feminist insight. Indeed, without women writers such as Clingerman, we might never have had feminist authors such as Russ. By using deceptively sweet stories about family and home to explore the most pressing scientific and social issues of their day, domestic science fiction authors paved the way for a new generation of writers to dream of—and become—the women who work together to build the new models of family, politics, and literature that Mildred Clingerman clearly knew were both necessary and possible.



MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO

Mildred Clingerman

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Mrs. Chriswell's little roadster came to a shuddering halt. Here was the perfect spot. Only one sagging wire fence to step over and not a cow in sight. Mrs. Chriswell was terrified of cows, and if the truth were told, only a little less afraid of her daughter-in-law, Clara. It was all Clara's idea that her mother-in-law should now be lurking in meadows peering at birds. Clara had been delighted with the birdwatching idea, but frankly, Mrs. Chriswell was bored with birds. They *flew* so much. And as for their colours, it was useless for her to speculate. Mrs. Chriswell was one of those rare women who are quite, quite colour-blind.

"But, Clara," Mrs. Chriswell had pleaded, "what's the point if I can't tell what colour they are?"

"Well, but, darling," Clara had said crisply, "how much cleverer if you get to know them just from the distinctive markings!"

Mrs. Chriswell, sighing a little as she recalled the firm look of Clara's chin, manoeuvred herself and her burdens over the sagging wire fence. She successfully juggled the binoculars, the heavy bird book, and her purse, and thought how ghastly it was at sixty to be considered so useless that she must be provided with harmless occupations to keep her out of the way.

Since Mr. Chriswell's death she had moved in with her son and his wife to face a life of enforced idleness. The servants resented her presence in the kitchen, so cooking was out. Clara and the snooty nursemaid would brook no interference with the nursery routine, so Mrs. Chriswell had virtually nothing to do. Even her crocheted doilies disappeared magically soon after their presentation to Clara and the modern furniture.

Mrs. Chriswell shifted the heavy bird book and considered rebelling. The sun was hot and her load was heavy. As she toiled on across the field she thought she saw the glint of sun on water. She would sit and crochet in the shade nearby and remove the big straw cartwheel hat Clara termed "just the thing."

Arrived at the trees, Mrs. Chriswell dropped her burdens and flung the hat willy-nilly. Ugly, ridiculous thing. She glanced around for the water she thought she'd seen, but there was no sign of it. She leaned back against a tree trunk and sighed blissfully. A little breeze had sprung up and was cooling the damp tendrils on her forehead. She opened her big purse and scrambled through the muddle of contents for her crochet hook and the ball of thread attached to a half-finished doily. In her search she came across the snapshots of

her granddaughters—in colour, they were, but unfortunately Mrs. Chriswell saw them only in various shades of grey. The breeze was getting stronger now, very pleasant, but the dratted old cartwheel monstrosity was rolling merrily down the slight grade to the tangle of berry bushes a few yards away. Well, it would catch on the brambles. But it didn't. The wind flirted it right around the bushes, and the hat disappeared.

"Fiddle!" Mrs. Chriswell dared not face Clara without the hat. Still hanging on to the bulky purse, she got up to give chase. Rounding the tangle of bushes, she ran smack into a tall young man in uniform.

"Oh!" Mrs. Chriswell said. "Have you seen my hat?"

The young man smiled and pointed on down the hill. Mrs. Chriswell was surprised to see her hat being passed from hand to hand among three other tall young men in uniform. They were laughing at it, and she didn't much blame them. They were standing beside a low, silvery aircraft of some unusual design. Mrs. Chriswell studied it a moment, but, really, she knew nothing about such things. . . . The sun glinted off it, and she realized this was what she had thought was water. The young man beside her touched her arm. She turned towards him and saw that he had put a rather lovely little metal hat on his head. He offered her one with grave courtesy. Mrs. Chriswell smiled up at him and nodded. The young man fitted the hat carefully, adjusting various little ornamental knobs on the top of it.

"Now we can talk," he said. "Do you hear well?"

"My dear boy," Mrs. Chriswell said, "of course I do. I'm not so old as all that." She found a smooth stone and sat down to chat. This was much nicer than birdwatching, or even crochet.

The tall young man grinned and signalled excitedly to his companions. They too put on little metal hats and came bounding up the hill. Still laughing, they deposited the cartwheel in Mrs. Chriswell's lap. She patted the stone by way of invitation, and the youngest looking one of the four dropped down beside her.

"What is your name, Mother?" he asked. "Ida Chriswell," she said. "What's yours?" "My name is Jord," the boy said.

Mrs. Chriswell patted his hand. "That's a nice, unusual name." The boy grabbed Mrs. Chriswell's hand and rubbed it against the smoothness of his cheek.

"You are like my Mother's Mother," the boy explained, "whom I have not seen in too long." The other young men laughed, and the boy looked abashed and stealthily wiped with his hands at a tear that slid down his nose.

Mrs. Chriswell frowned warningly at the laughter and handed him her clean pocket handkerchief, scented with lavender. Jord turned it over and over in his hands, and then tentatively sniffed at it.

"It's all right," Mrs. Chriswell said. "Use it. I have another." But Jord only breathed more deeply of the faint perfume in its folds.

"This is only the thinnest thread of melody," he said, "but, Mother Ida, it is very like one note from the Harmony Hills of home!" He passed the handkerchief all around the circle, and the young men sniffed at it and smiled.

Mrs. Chriswell tried to remember if she had ever read of the Harmony Hills, but Mr. Chriswell had always told her she was lamentably weak in geography, and she supposed that this was one of her blank spots, like where on earth was Timbuktu? Or the Hel-landgone people were always talking about? But it was rude not to make some comment. Wars shifted people about such a lot, and

these boys must be homesick and weary of being strangers, longing to talk of home. She was proud of herself for realizing that they were strangers. But there was something... Hard to say, really. The way they had bounded up the hill? Mountain people, perhaps, to whom hills were mere springboards to heights beyond.

"Tell me about your hills," she said.

"Wait," Jord said. "I will show you." He glanced at his leader as if for approval. The young man who had fitted her hat nodded. Jord drew a fingernail across the breast of his uniform. Mrs. Chriswell was surprised to see a pocket opening where no pocket had been before. Really, the Air Force did amazing things with its uniforms, though, frankly, Mrs. Chriswell thought the cut of these a bit extreme.

Carefully, Jord was lifting out a packet of gossamer material. He gently pressed the centre of the packet and it blossomed out into voluminous clouds of featherweight threads, held loosely together in a wave like a giant spider web. To Mrs. Chriswell's eyes the mesh of threads was the colour of fog, and almost as insubstantial.

"Do not be afraid," Jord said softly, stepping closer to her. "Bend your head, close your eyes, and you shall hear the lovely Harmony Hills of home."

There was one quick-drawn breath of almost-fear, but before she shut her eyes Mrs. Chriswell saw the love in Jord's, and in that moment she knew how rarely she had seen this look, anywhere... anytime. If Jord had asked it of her, it was all right. She closed her eyes and bowed her head, and in that attitude of prayer she felt a soft weightlessness descend upon her. It was as if twilight had come down to drape itself on her shoulders. And then the music began. Behind the darkness of her eyes it rose in majesty and power, in colours she had never seen, never guessed.

It blossomed like flowers—giant forests of them. Their scents were intoxicating and filled her with joy. She could not tell if the blending perfumes made the music, or if the music itself created the flowers and the perfumes that poured forth from them. She did not care. She wanted only to go on forever listening to all this colour. It seemed odd to be listening to colour, perhaps, but after

all, she told herself, it would seem just as odd to me to see it.

She sat blinking at the circle of young men. The music was finished. Jord was putting away the gossamer threads in the secret pocket, and laughing aloud at her astonishment.

"Did you like it, Mother Ida?" He dropped down beside her again and patted her wrinkled face, still pink with excitement.

"Oh, Jord," she said, "how lovely... Tell me..."

But the leader was calling them all to order. "I'm sorry, Mother Ida, we must hurry about our business. Will you answer some questions? It is very important."

"Of course," Mrs. Chriswell said. She was still feeling a bit dazed.

"If I can... If it's like the quizzes on the TV, though, I'm not very good at it."

The young man shook his head. "We," he said, "have been instructed to investigate and report on the true conditions of this... of the world." He pointed at the aircraft glittering in the sunlight. "We have travelled all around in that slow machine, and our observations have been accurate..." He hesitated, drew a deep breath and continued. "... and perhaps we shall be forced to give an unfavourable report, but this depends a great deal on the outcome of our talk with you. We are glad you stumbled upon us. We were about to set

out on a foray to secure some individual for questioning. It is our last task." He smiled. "And Jord, here, will not be sorry. He is sick for home and loved ones." He sighed, and all the other young men echoed the sigh.

"Every night," Mrs. Chriswell said, "I pray for peace on earth. I cannot bear to think of boys like you fighting and dying, and the folks at home waiting and waiting..." She glanced all around at their listening faces. "And I'll tell you something else," she said, "I find I can't really hate anybody, even the enemy." Around the circle the young men nodded at each other. "Now ask me your questions." She fumbled in her purse for her crochet work and found it.

Beside her Jord exclaimed with pleasure at the sight of the half-finished doily. Mrs. Chriswell warmed to him even more.

The tall young man began his grave questioning. They were very simple questions, and Mrs. Chriswell answered them without hesitation. Did she believe in God? Did she believe in the dignity of man? Did she truly abhor war? Did she believe that man was capable of love for his neighbour? The questions went on and on, and Mrs. Chriswell crocheted while she gave her answers.

At last, when the young man had quite run out of questions, and Mrs. Chriswell had finished the doily, Jord broke the sun-lazy silence that had fallen upon them.

"May I have it, Mother?" He pointed to the doily. Mrs. Chriswell bestowed it upon him with great pleasure, and Jord, like a very small boy, stuffed it greedily into another secret pocket. He pointed at her stuffed purse.

"May I look, Mother?"

Mrs. Chriswell indulgently passed him her purse. He opened it and poured the litter of contents on the ground between them. The snapshots of Mrs. Chriswell's grandchildren stared up at him. Jord smiled at the pretty little-girl faces. He groped in the chest pocket and drew out snapshots of his own. "These," he told Mrs. Chriswell proudly, "are my little sisters. Are they not like these little girls of yours? Let us exchange, because soon I will be at home with them, and there will be no need for pictures. I would like to have yours."

Mrs. Chriswell would have given Jord the entire contents of the purse if he had asked for them. She took the snapshots he offered and looked with pleasure at the sweet-faced children. Jord still stirred at the pile of possessions from Mrs. Chriswell's purse. By the time she was ready to leave he had talked her out of three illustrated recipes torn from magazines, some swatches of material, and two pieces of peppermint candy.

The young man who was the leader helped her to remove the pretty little hat when Mrs. Chriswell indicated he should. She would have liked to keep it, but she didn't believe Clara would approve. She clapped the straw monstrosity on her head, kissed Jord's cheek, waved

goodbye to the rest, and groped her way around the berry bushes. She had to grope because her eyes were tear-filled. They had saluted her so grandly as she left.

Clara's usually sedate household was in an uproar when Mrs. Chriswell returned. All the radios in the house were blaring. Even Clara sat huddled over the one in the library. Mrs. Chriswell heard a boy in the street crying "EXTRA! EXTRA!" and the upstairs maid almost knocked her down getting out the front door to buy one. Mrs. Chriswell, sleepy and somewhat sunburned, supposed it was something about the awful war.

She was just turning up the stairs to her room when the snooty nursemaid came rushing down to disappear kitchenwards with another newspaper in her hand. Good, the children were alone. She'd stop in to see them. Suddenly she heard the raised voices from the back of the house. The cook was yelling at somebody. "I tell you, I saw it! I took out some garbage and there it was, right over me!" Mrs. Chriswell lingered at the foot of the stairway puzzled by all the confusion. The housemaid came rushing in with the extra edition. Mrs. Chriswell quietly reached out and took it. "Thank you, Nadine," she said. The nursemaid was still staring at her as she climbed the stairs.

Edna and Evelyn were sitting on the nursery floor, a candy box between them, and shrieking at each other when their grandmother opened the door. They were cramming chocolates into their mouths between shrieks. Their faces and pinafores were smeared with the candy. Edna suddenly yanked Evelyn's hair, hard. "Pig!" she shouted. "You got three more than I did!"

"Children! Children! Not fighting?" Mrs. Chriswell was delighted. Here was something she could cope with. She led them firmly to the bathroom and washed their faces. "Change your frocks," she said, "and I'll tell you my adventure."

There were only hissing accusals and whispered countercharges behind her as she turned her back on the children to scan the newspaper. The headlines leapt up at her.

*Mysterious broadcast interrupts programmes on
all wavelengths*

*Unknown woman saves world, say men from
space*

One sane human found on earth

*Cooking, needlework, home, religious interests
sway space judges*

Every column of the paper was crowded with the same unintelligible nonsense. Mrs. Chriswell folded it neatly, deposited it on the table, and turned to tie her granddaughters' sashes and tell her adventure.

"... And then he gave me some lovely photographs. In colour, he said... Good little girls, just like Edna and Evelyn. Would you like to see them?"

Edna made a rude noise with her mouth pursed. Evelyn's face grew saintlike in retaliation. "Yes, show us," she said.

Mrs. Chriswell passed them the snapshots, and the children drew close together for the moment before Evelyn dropped the pictures as if they were blazing. She stared hard at her grandmother while Edna made a gagging noise.

"Green!" Edna gurgled. "Gaaa... green skins!"

"Grandmother!" Evelyn was tearful. "Those children are frog-coloured!"

Mrs. Chriswell bent over to pick up the pictures. "Now, now, children," she murmured absently. "We don't worry about the colour of people's skins. Red... yellow... black... we're all God's children. Asia or Africa, makes no difference..." But before she could finish her thought, the nursemaid loomed disapprovingly in the doorway. Mrs. Chriswell hurried out to her own room, while some tiny worry nagged at her mind. "Red, yellow, black, white," she murmured over and over, "and brown... but green...?" Geography had always been her weak point. Green... Now where on earth...?



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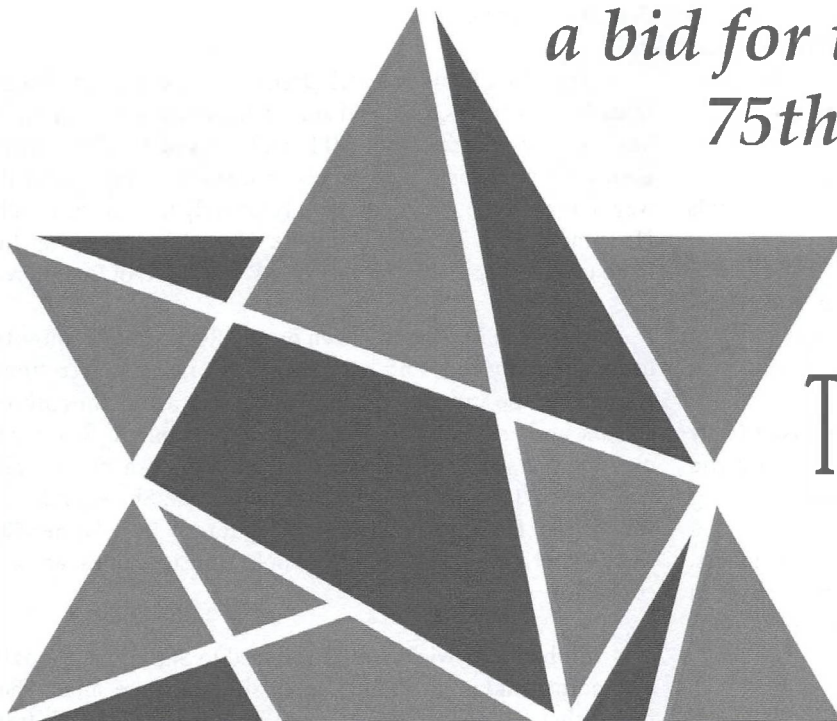
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THE READERCON COMMITTEE

Nightwing Whitehead spent her early years playing with books and fabric. Eventually, she discovered that it was fun to read the books and create with the fabric, instead of the other way around. After more than a decade talking to room-sized computers, Nightwing was sent for retraining, and has since been trying to reclothe the world. If you can describe it she can create it, in fabric. She has been keeping out of trouble this year by costuming for community theaters, high schools, and colleges in Connecticut and Massachusetts. When not busy costuming what feels like an endless series of *Les Mis*, she can be found playing with fabric or howling at the moon, sometimes both at the same time.

Louis West is a Readercon newbie compared to many seasoned veterans on the committee, but has become addicted to everyone's irrepressible creativity. Subatomic physics, astronomy, biophysics, medical genetics, and international finance all lurk in Louis's background. He's fond of hard SF and writes reviews for a variety of speculative fiction publications while writing in both Nanopunk and Biopunk genres.

Louise J. Waugh is largely incorporeal lately due to some sort of luminal refractory disorder. If you happen to see this person, be sure to say hello.

Tanya Washburn (Selkiechick) has been an avid reader for years, and this is her third Readercon. She may or may not have a wicked plan.

Emily Wagner used to be a YA librarian, and isn't really sure what she is anymore. You can talk to her on Twitter if you want, at @emilytheslayer

Sonya Taaffe reads three and a half dead languages, none of which she's used to write her bio this year. She lives in Somerville with her husband, their two cats, and a lot of non-Euclidean architecture.

Nevenah Smith is coping with life in the Frozen North of Wisconsin. With any luck, she'll be at Readercon next year. The glass studio still isn't finished, there are now only three cats to boss her around (though there are more fish), but she's succeeded in keeping her parents alive, fed, and happy. She's still enjoying designing this thing you hold in your hands even though she had only one day (!) to do it this year. She is grateful for the kindness and sanity of her editors.

William A. Sherman III attended his first Readercon in 2001 as a one-day visitor for Readercon 11. From then, he has become an annual, full-weekend attendee and frequent volunteer. So much the volunteer, in fact, that the Concom would elect him to membership in January 2010. (Please, help me.) An attendee of both MIT and Salem (MA) State University, he has attained B.S.'s in Mathematics, and Business Administration/Accounting, and humble B.A.'s in English Literature and Spanish Literature and Culture, with a minor in Economics. He comes from careers in long-term healthcare management and real estate management; yet, his real preparation for Readercon began in 1976, when he first read Jack Williamson's *Trapped in Space*, and 1983, when he joined MITSFS. He resides in Boxford, MA, with his parents, two bulldogs, and about two thousand books and SF pulps, and is still perfecting his first SF short story, about time travel, Salem, Massachusetts, and Periclean Athens.

David G. Shaw is a web designer, cook, parent, blogger (blog.belm.com), skeptic, and atheist, in no particular order. He has a biology degree from MIT, and worked for the General Foods Corporation—experiences that occasionally get in the way of his attempts to cook more intuitively than scientifically. He is married to She Who Must Be Obeyed; together they live in an uneasy truce with their son He Who Will Not Be Ignored.

B. Diane Martin has been on the Readercon Committee for over twenty cons and has served as ConChair seven times. Diane, ever the attorney, continues to encourage all the authors, editors, and artists that she's had the opportunity to work with over the years at Readercon to name a literary executor in their will. Diane lives with her husband, David G. Shaw, and their son Miles (He Who Will Not Be Ignored) in a Somerville, MA, Victorian home filled with books, music, games, art, and cookware.

Sioban Krzywicki was introduced to SFF conventions by her mother and grandmother when she was quite small. She's found that helping with the convention is a nice break from moving and arranging data for various companies. She's a trans woman and this is her first Readercon as a woman, though she's been working on Readercon for three years.

Dawn Jones-Low arrived at the first Readercon just in time to respond to a plea for help. Ensorcelled to serve the hardworking wizards that run Readercon, she brought another helper, Thom Jones-Low, to Readercon 2. They've both been

under the spell of Readercon ever since. They officially joined the committee just prior to Readercon 11 when they were summoned to enchant a horde of minions under the guise of “managing volunteers”—a task they perform faithfully to this day. When not at Readercon, they reside blissfully on their 40-acre farm in Vermont where Thom writes software and Dawn breeds Arabian sport horses.

Steve Huff likes to fix things! As one of the founders of Operation Hammond, he hopes your con experience will be safe as well as enjoyable. Alignment: Lawful Good.

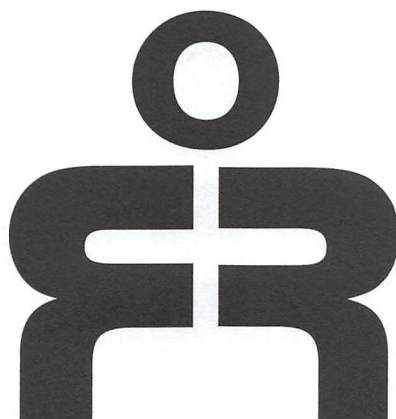
Crystal Huff spends her time chasing down conventioners, encouraging acts of kindness, and sometimes managing a team of software engineers. She has thrice been the Chair of Readercon, and is a member of the Helsinki in 2017 bid to host Worldcon. Alignment: Chaotic Good.

Merryl Gross spends most of her time slaving over a hot computer as she handles membership issues and the website. Yes, this means she *still* knows where you all live, mwahaha. When she isn't online saving Middle Earth, she wrangles software engineers into creating usable web applications. By slaving over a hot computer. Sigh.

While doing certain quasi-infinite coëditing-with-Ellen tasks for Readercon, **Richard Duffy** was intrigued to come upon the obscure 44-year-old theorem that every permutation of a countably infinite set N is a product $\pi_1 \pi_2 \pi_3$ where each π_j is a single infinite cycle moving all the elements of N . (Yay fixed-point-free maps!) He can be induced to explain this in exquisite detail by being offered a hoppy IPA, or possibly some chili-accented very dark chocolate.

While doing certain quasi-infinite coëditing-with-Richard tasks for Readercon, **Ellen Brody** spent enough time with him to hear that the above theorem also works in the version using products $\pi_1 \dots \pi_k$ for any $k \geq 3$, but of course not for $k = 2$! She can be induced to arrange a discussion of this if offered some chili-accented very dark chocolate, or possibly a hoppy IPA.

Rae Sockut Borman loves books because they are filled with words and she loves Readercon because it brings together amazing people for fantastic conversations. You will see her bustling around Readercon 26 because she's conchair this year, and she will be most notable for having an adorable baby in tow. Come say hello!



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