

Feminist Voices

Tepper Speaks Before Feminist Science Fiction Convention

Presented by Trilby Wu Versace

Sheri S. Tepper, one of the Guests of Honor at this year's feminist science fiction convention WisCon 22, is a science fiction author of approximately 43 books under the name Sheri S. Tepper and under the pseudonyms A.J. Orde and B.J. Oliphant. The following is the first half of her speech. In keeping with Feminist Voices desire to provide an open forum for all women's voices, I hope some of the ideas presented by Sheri Tepper will stimulate an on going discussion and consideration of issues which concern us all. I mean have you ever sat down and talked about your problems and cares with your cat or horse? The second half of the speech will be presented in next month's issues due to space limitations.

story about deer.

This happened a few decades ago in a small community west of Denver where the local deer population soared, and there were so many deer that they were eating the trees bare and wiping out people's gardens and a general uproar arose with people calling for something to be done. So, they called in the Game and Fish department, and the Game and Fish department said, no problem, we'll give extra hunting licenses in this area and get the deer population down where it belongs.

movies.

During my checkered career, friends of a more prosaic bent have asked me why I prefer fantasy, and after struggling with a few pleasant but unconvincing lies, I've settled on the truth. I have wanted



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Come all Ye Strident

Speech by Sheri S. Tepper,
May 1998, at WisCon 22

When I was invited to be a guest of honor at WisCon 22, I naively asked what kind of speech the audience might be most interested in. I didn't get any answer. In the absence of any directions to the contrary, I decided to talk about how I feel about science fiction and fantasy, why I think it might be the answer to peace and immortality, as well as bringing on the era of the voluntary menopause and the cure for the common cold. I also think it might save a lot of women's lives, and to explain that I have to tell you a little

That's just the start of the story, but keep it in the back of your mind while I babble on about science fiction and fantasy. I began reading fantasy at about age nine or ten, and I began reading science fiction—by which I mean fantasy set in slightly more rigorous environments—a few years later when the local library let me into the adult shelves. If a book was about the impossible, the not actual and the out of the ordinary, that's the book I wanted because I was being brought up overloaded with the possible, factual and ordinary. Mine was one of those families like the ants in White's *Once and Future King* who said that "Everything not required is forbidden," and such an atmosphere was immeasurably sweetened with fantasy books and radio stories and even Flash Gordon on Saturday afternoons at the

the unreal because the real was not nice. During my childhood, in societal terms, reality in the 30s was the depression and reality in the 40s it was world war II. In personal terms, reality was a large, elderly family engaged in incessant tribal warfare on multiple emotional, psychological, and economic fronts. I don't recall that any two of my family ever really concurred about anything. My family and Septimius's family in *Gate to Women's Country* bear a not inexplicable similarity.

I wanted out, and reading fantasy was the exit of choice. In fantasy, problems did not go on, endlessly, year after year like a soap opera on an eternal tape-loop. They did not submerge into bottomless swamps of recriminations or al-

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coholism. They could be solved, sometimes by miraculous or magical intervention, true, but they reached conclusions. They were high minded, they sought to right wrongs; they stood for the just and the good; they were inevitably triumphant. And, instead of talking about feelings or people they frequently talked about ideas. I found ideas tremendously seductive.

My family despaired of me because I did not seem to be in touch with reality. They were quite right, of course. I was as out of touch with reality as it was possible to get. I wanted more than anything to escape into a better and more exultant world, with the escape part required first. Marriage was, in those days, among my family's circle, the only legitimate way for a girl to leave home, so I escaped by marrying young.

I know now, that simply running away would have made more sense, but hiding in a fantasy world for nineteen years does not equip one for honest rebellion, particularly when even tiny attempts at mutiny had always been relentlessly stamped out. Seven years later, with two children to support, I was divorced and facing way.

I did this and I did that, little of it very important, all of it tiresome and none of it inspiring, and by the end of that decade I was working as the director—a title that was provided in lieu of adequate salary and to disguise the servile nature of much of the work—of a small nonprofit agency which provided birth control for poor women as well as for women who were not poor but whose doctors would not give them birth control. It was 1963.

I was totally unequipped for medical management, but at that time, there was very little medical about birth control. The methods then in use couldn't hurt the user even if applied at the wrong end. Also, the agency had a strong educational bent—and talking about education allowed us to include a lot of people who would be uncomfortable talking about other things. Some of our ladies—I use the word in its nicest sense—did not want to deal with the intransigence of biological drives and the embarrassment of physiological equipment. I'll never forget the board member who resigned because, as she put it, she "didn't want her children to know those words, and didn't think any children needed to know them." The words were, of course, penis and vagina. She preferred, as I recall, the words "tinkler" and "down there."

Over the years I'd written stories for my children and bits and pieces of verse, as I had time, when I was moved to, but it was on that particular job that I started writing a lot, not from a literary background, not because I'd majored in English or Literature at college, not because I wanted to be an author, but because the job demanded it. I did not write fantasies or science fiction. I wrote educational pamphlets. I wrote inspirational sermons. I wrote presentations to be given before committees of county and state agencies,



Equilibrium by Katherine Hosing. See art review on page 9.

I wrote hell raising letters. I wrote about things that were real and painful, about hard decisions, and about changing culture, and I got up in front of often antagonistic people, usually with my stomach in cramps, and my bowels aflutter, and gave speeches. I saw my job and self not as a provider of medical services but as an agent of social change.

It was as the director of this agency that I first had my nose rubbed in some of the real reasons that the world wasn't nice. The world wasn't nice because people had children they weren't ready for, didn't want, couldn't support, couldn't care for, loved for the wrong reasons, hated for the wrong reasons. People did this because the world at large, great chunks of it, doctors, hospitals, county commissioners, senators, judges, preachers, priests, husbands, in-laws, people at virtually every level of the community, many of them male but just as many female, coerced them into doing so. Women were told they should have babies to fulfill their womanhood by mothers who had been told the same thing, or by men who had been taught that getting a woman pregnant meant they were real men. Older people wanted grandchildren to convince them of their own immortality, the state wanted children to expand the population, the people in the maternity wards wanted babies to keep themselves in business, the insurance companies wanted babies so they could sell more policies, a man wanted another boy so he'd have a football team. In those days very few of these babies were born out of wedlock, divorce was relatively rare, many women were full time housewives, and babies were people's little oodum doodums. The universal media picture of babies was sweet, and nice smelling and angelic and smiling and they

from mental illnesses, particularly depression. This is not opinion, it is fact. The women of the fifties were Harriet Nelson only on the outside, and from a woman's point of view it was not the ideal world which most of the political right wants us to return to.

From where I sat in my job, I saw the unhappy results of pronatalism. Poverty and alcoholism, abuse and fear. I saw our volunteers go out on rounds leaving birth control supplies in ash pits and in boxes in alleys where women could pick them up secretly because they had to hide their use from posturing, hard drinking, hard hitting husbands who measured their manhood by the number of pregnancies they could inflict, at home and abroad. This was pre-women's rights, of course. Almost pre-human rights. Some of the county commissioners and health department moguls I encountered on that job, trying to get them to include family planning in their county maternity programs, were not homo sapiens, though they were probably homo erectus, in one sense or another.

Our agency, meantime, was not exactly women's right either. We would not encourage immorality. We gave supplies only to married women, women about to be married if they brought a note from the minister, or women who had already had one illegitimate child. The hypocrisy of this did not escape me. There was one thing the agency stood for, however, which I could wholeheartedly support without any feeling of ambiguity, and that was the need for the world to stop population increase, or perhaps even to reduce population. At that time, in the sixties, the need to stop population growth was widely accepted. In those days, if an advertiser for a station wagon showed a TV commercial with a family of five or six kids

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noises.

If a woman wasn't either a nun or a Good Mother, then she was probably either a bad person or a poor thing. Many of the women who had babies because the world demanded they have babies were closet alcoholics, and many suffered

piling into the station wagon, the phone lines would start to ring, and the ad would be pulled. The two child family was, at that time, the accepted ideal. Lots of people around the world were hungry and worldwide hunger was the rationale for world wide population limitation.

There were cautionary books on every newsstand. In 1967 William and Paul Paddock wrote a book called *Famine—1975*. In 1968 Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*. India was starving, southeast Asia was starving. These books and others saw famine as the inevitable consequence of growth, they cried in strident voices, famine, famine.

Unfortunately, they were crying wolf, and there wasn't any wolf. The famine didn't happen.

Suddenly India could feed itself. New strains of grain doubled and tripled production. New kinds of fisheries brought in bigger catches. Food was plentiful. Gradually, the idea that population must be controlled began to move away from center stage, giving way to other concerns. We worried about the Cold War. We worried about the Nuclear Threat. We worried about Vietnam. And though we've heard the call of famine, famine now and then, we've been relatively unconcerned, right up to today.

During the sixties and seventies, I simply went on writing sermons and reading fantasy. If there was no famine, there was still plenty of other ugly stuff in the world, and I still wanted one that was nicer. And during the sixties and the seventies, the human race went on proliferating. The world population has grown was born, than it had in the preceding four million years. There are six billion of us now. The world strains to support that. The rain forests are going up in smoke. The seas are fished empty in many areas. Whales and dolphins and seals are dying, not because we kill them, but because we leave too few fish in the seas for them to eat.

The rate of population growth is slowing, so we are told. We will double population only one more time to twelve billion. In my neighborhood, men still threaten to kill their wives if they get their tubes tied because that annual pregnancy is the only evidence they've got that they are real men. Where I come from, seduction is considered macho unless it happens to your sister.

The wolf criers may have been wrong, again and again, but the kicker to that old story was that even though the boy falsely cried wolf wolf, eventually there was a real wolf. To this world of famine criers who have so far cried wrong, there will eventually come the real famine. There is a finite limit, and I've described in one book and another what that world might be like. I don't like the idea of it. There are still too many smiley faced cornucopians among us who tell us that there are no limits, that the more of us there are, the more good ideas we will have. This is not necessarily true. Only well fed people can have good ideas. Green revolution or not, eighty percent of children in South Asia now are stunted from malnutrition. Since 1984, per capita production of food grains has dropped steadily. World grain stores, which used to be enough for a year or more, are now at a two month supply level.

A friend of mine in Santa Fe recently told me she is expecting her fourth child, though she is struggling hard to make do

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for the first three. She is an intelligent woman with an emerging career, but whenever she feels insecure about herself, she gets pregnant. But it's all right, she told me. It's not like she lived in Africa or South America or some other place with overpopulation. Whenever I feel myself giving way to giddy euphoria, I summon up her face with its blank eyed expression of total incomprehension of any reason why her fourth pregnancy should concern anyone but her.

In a recent issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the environmental author Bill McKibben had an article titled, "A Special Moment in History." His thesis is that now may be the last opportunity we have to influence the future of the world because the changes we have already made are so sweeping and are approaching such finality that we may not be able to fix them. He cites a sociologist at Washington State University, William Catton, who has tried to calculate the amount of energy human beings use each day. If we were hunter-gatherers, we would need, on the average, about 2500

calories a day, pretty much all of it in food, some small amount possibly in dried dung or firewood. This is the energy intake, he says, of a dolphin. But a modern human being uses 31,000 calories, most of it in the form of fossil fuel. This is the daily intake of a pilot whale. And the average American, he says, uses six times that. One hundred eighty-three thousand calories a day, as much as a sperm whale. My friend's fourth baby won't be a hunter-gatherer or a dolphin. It will be another sperm whale added to the three she has already, four counting herself. McKibben says we've become a different people, not wiser or kinder, but just bigger in our impact upon earth. In this country, each of us is hauling along a sperm whale, like a Macy's parade balloon, while it soaks up the calories in fossil fuel and deep water aquifers and irreplaceable forests.

It won't help to make green-resolutions. We can't recycle or compost or passive solar our way out of this. Those balloons are up there no matter how we live. We can't cut our use of fossil fuel enough to reduce the size of those balloons. If every person in the country cut

far enough to do some good, we would each have a total energy budget that would allow us to drive nine miles a day. If you have a dishwasher or a TV or are on the internet, forget about driving at all. When China's living standard starts to go up, in order to do any good, our energy budget would have to drop to six miles a day, and that's not even thinking about your lawn mower or your clothes dryer. China's balloons are already twice the size they were in 1980. Mexicans who have lived as very poor people at a little more than hunter-gatherer level cross our borders and within a few years, they've got five or six sperm whales of their own.

I have been invited to many science fiction conventions, but this is the first I have ever attended. I have a selfish reason for coming here. I am firmly convinced that the problems I'm talking about can be solved only now and only by feminists, male or female, and further, I think they're problems that feminist fantasy and science fiction writers and readers are uniquely qualified to explore and elucidate, because only they have both the experience and the imagination to do so. No traditional methods are going to work. We are at a new crossroads, and none of the old maps can tell us where we're going.

Come All Ye Strident: WisCon Speech Continued

In the September issue, Trilby Wu-Versace presented the first half of the featured speaker's speech at the Annual WisCon convention. The following is the continuation of that speech.

Come all Ye Strident
Speech given by Sheri S. Tepper,
May 1998, at WisCon 22
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Reality is that without going back to the stone age, there is no way we can reduce the size of the balloons. We can only reduce their number. Explore with me a bit.

Both science and the law have had a great deal to do with our current situation. Science solves problems and the law institutionalizes the solutions. Science creates better crops and better ways to grow them,

the law subsidizes farmers to use new methods and hunger is defeated. Science creates immunizations to prevent communicable diseases, the law requires those immunizations of all school children, and communicable illnesses are defeated. But science and the law don't limit themselves to those problems which are better off solved and legislated. It mixes into problems that are best left alone. Science has, for example, invented ways to keep very premature babies alive, and the law, pushed by the religio-political right, now requires every hospital to do everything it can to save such children even when parents and doctors say no.

The result of this is that we now have in this country a quarter of a million disabled children who are not toting just a sperm whale each, but a whole pod of such

whales, each. These are the super preemies who would have died naturally in most other countries or in this country up to a few years ago, who are being kept alive by hospitals because the law says they must, often against family's wishes and doctor's best advice.

Dr. Lucille Perrota, a New York neonatologist, says that one third of these children will be seriously disabled as a consequence of lung or liver failure, another third will have what she calls—with scientific understatement—moderate disability, which is anything from mental retardation to blindness. The remaining third will be only “mildly” affected with learning disabilities and behavioral problems. In other words, virtually all these children will be

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towing multiple sperm whales when they leave the hospital, and every one of them will need sperm whale after sperm whale of medical care and social services and special education. Their families will often collapse under the weight of constant care and enormous cost.

The annual cost of neonatal intensive care is 2.5 billion, and aftercare, including education, is estimated at 10 billion annually. Ten percent of all health care for children is spent on 2% of the children not to cure, just to keep alive.

What's a solution? Well, disabled babies are born very frequently to drug addicted mothers. So, in Anaheim, California, a group has started a program to stop drug addicted mothers from having more children by paying them to be sterilized. Among the first women to receive payment were a 28 year old woman with five children in foster care; a 38 year old recovering drug user who has had fourteen children; and a 32 year old methadone user who's had six. The first eight women in the program have had a total of 51 children, 43 of them in foster care. My old agency, by the way, along with the ACLU, is very concerned about this threat to the liberty of the women involved because the women may later regret their decision.

I know many parents who later regretted their decision to have children, but I have yet to see the ACLU worry about them. Regret, it seems, like time, moves in only one direction, that of pronatalism even though no one has ever illustrated that having children is necessary or even desirable for all people. The fact is probably to the contrary, that many people are both happier and lead more constructive lives if they do not have children.

The law that forced preemies to live lives of constant pain and often forced their families into ruin was pushed through by the religio-political right. Fetal and newborn life is always sacred to the religio-political right because they believe that human beings are at the center of the universe and reproduction is the single most sacred right of human beings. Reproduction is more important than people's bodies or minds, more important than their talents or skills, their spirits or their souls.

For example, some women have been jailed for killing their children. Some men have been jailed as pedophiles or rapists. Some judges have suggested that the women could be sterilized and the men castrated as a precondition for release. Some of the men and women have said yes, let me

be sterilized, let me be castrated. And the idea is widely attacked, even by some feminist groups who say that castration won't help because rape is a crime of violence rather than a crime of sex, failing to acknowledge that from a physiological point

not easily separable. In some people they aren't separable at all. Any endocrinologist knows why thirteen and fourteen year old boys pick up guns and start shooting people.

You can execute a man for rape mur-

You can put her in jail for twenty years for killing her child. You can let her out to have another child and kill it, helping her be a murderess, or take it away from her, giving us yet another generation with the same genetics, but you can't sterilize her to prevent its happening again. You can destroy social bonds, mental and physical health, hope, courage, love, but you can't destroy the tissue that makes another baby, because that tissue is sacred.

Now, if we were an endangered species, I could see the sense of revering reproduction. We're not endangered. We're endangering everything else, the entire animal and vegetable kingdoms, the environment, the weather, but we're not endangered. What is there about reproductive capability that turns us all squishy inside. When I mention tubal ligation to my friend with the four sperm whales, she says, "Oh, it's so permanent." Yes, that's the idea.

If we're going to reduce the number of sperm whales we've got to get rid of the idea that reproduction is the be all and end all of life. Mice do it, fleas do it, even folks down on their knees do it. It's natural, given several million years of evolution, it's damn near inevitable, and it is not what makes human beings different from the rest of creation. We are different to some extent in our minds—though less than we like to think—and we are different to a great extent in our vocabulary, which enables us to get the wrong idea in lots of different ways, but we aren't even slightly different in reproduction. Not having a baby is not the worst thing that can happen to someone. Not having a baby may be, in many cases, the best thing that can happen. Being infertile is not the worst thing in the world. When I read of couples spending several hundred thousand dollars to get donor sperm from this one and donor egg from that one, and in vitro fertilization from this lab, to be inserted into that surrogate mother, so they can have a baby that's their own. I am appalled.

Much of the rest of the world worships reproduction. In Afghanistan, Taliban soldiers recently gave a young woman 100 lashes for traveling with a man to whom she was not related. In their view, women exist only to serve their wombs, which have to be pure for their eventual owners. In Iran a ban was slapped on a female film maker because she allowed a



Katherine Steichen Rosing "Chrysalis" 1992 72"x48"

of view, it makes no difference. The two are intimately linked. Both sex and violence result from hormones. Sexual violence is part of the mating behavior of species after species after species. The two emotions are

der. You can put him in solitary, where his mind goes away and his soul shrivels. You can jail him for life, but you can't castrate him. That would be cruel and unusual. You can take a woman away from society.

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character to be filmed without the traditional head scarf. The character was eight years old, but it was important that she be perceived as pure for her eventual owner. There's a macho man down the road from me who has fathered eleven children by four different women and doesn't support any of them. In statehouse after statehouse, lawmakers instinctively grab their collective crotch whenever someone says castration. You think cultures like that are going to solve this problem? Not men for whom procreation is their only source of pride, and not even women like my friend whose ability to procreate is her security blanket that proves she's alive.

We have among us here, however, a forum where solutions can be explored. I've always thought science fiction and fantasy was the genre of ideas. Oh, sure, we've got some sword and sorcery and space opera and horror fringes, but the field in general is a field of ideas. A lot of us write books because we're in love with ideas—though I know I have difficulty keeping the sermons out. We read about ideas, we think about ideas. Think about this.

To reduce the number of sperm whales, we have to design a system that will limit child bearing for a creature with four million years of evolution and five separate brains in her head, driven by all kinds of biological urges, pushed by all kinds of social conventions and familial expectations and handicapped by an inherited female trait, the desire to please. There must be ways to do this, and we have to do it before it is too late. Consider some of the following:

1. Men and women reproduce most easily and healthfully when they are between the ages of 18 and 25. The babies born to younger couples are also healthier, statistically. And if people have children at

this age, they are far less driven to have others later on.

2. Men and women can best support children, however, when they have completed their education and have their careers established, say from age thirty five to forty on. They are also, in many ways, better parents at that age, for they have more life experience to bring to the task.

3. Genetics works in people, too. Depressives father depressives. Mental illness runs in families. Addictives give birth to addictives. If a rancher has a herd of scruffy cows, the way he improves the stock is to buy a good bull.

4. An extended family of healthy individuals is a healthful environment in which a child can be reared. An extended family in which some are care takers and some bread winners, some are laps to sit on and others are shoulders to lean on offers employment and companionship for persons of various ages, genders, and occupations.

5. During much of western history, marriages were under the total control of the church and they were a specifically religious rite. Secular law has involved itself in marriages, which is none of its business, out of necessity to provide for children. Contracts, however, are secular and legal, they can also provide for children, and they can be enforced by a secular society.

6. It is perfectly legal for any group of people of any size or gender distribution and of any legal age to enter into a binding contract which specifies the responsibilities of the members.

7. Why, therefore, could we not encourage extended families built upon contractual relationships in which young men and women in their late teens are allowed to be biological parents, older men and women are the care giving parents, some members of the group are bread winners, some are maintainers, and roles would change as the people within the contract

grew older. Such contracts might provide that anyone may leave the contract group if he or she is unhappy, but no one may take a child with him or her. The contract would provide that all children are the child of the contractual family, entitled to security, free of the danger of divorce or disruption.

Now, if you say why reinvent the extended family? My answer is, if you have an extended family you can get along with, you don't need to.

In order for this to happen, we'd have to quit thinking about marriage and the march down the aisle and the nuclear family, and the march into the divorce court and who gets custody, and we'd have to think instead about life. We would be searching for not a life-mate, but a nurturing life-group. We'd have to de-sentimentalize babies. We'd have to say no, we're not going to have preemies born to older mothers and keep them alive to be retarded and blind. We'd have to say, we think children are more important than that. Some of us would have to say, I'm willing to have a baby at eighteen and let my life-group help rear it while I finish my education. I'm willing to provide care and sustenance to some other young person in my turn. Some of us would have to say, no, I'm not going to have a biological child because I'm an addictive person, or a depressive person, or I have a genetic illness, but I can share in the life of an extended family in another capacity. We'd have to say, no one person can provide everything a child needs, but an extended family can guarantee there'll always be someone around for that child.

If an extended family of six or eight or fifteen individuals has one or two children that it's raising, the people in that family might not find it so necessary for every woman to have one or two or four sperm whales of her own, at any cost.

That's only one idea. There must be

hundreds we could explore. It is necessary to explore them before the day comes that everyone agrees population must be controlled, for we can all imagine the unpleasant ways in which that may happen...

And this brings me back to that story I started to tell you at the beginning about the little community that had too many deer. Remember? They said they'd just issue extra hunting permits, and that'll cut down the number of deer.

So they did. And the community was still awash in deer. And they said, well, it'll take another year or so. But the other year or so went by, and they still had too many deer. And finally, someone asked a wildlife specialist, and he came in and went over the game records for the past several years, and it turned out most hunters had been after trophies, that is they'd been hunting bucks with nice big racks of antlers.

And the wildlife fellow laughed, and he said, you may be killing the big buck deer, but a yearling buck can impregnate twenty does. If you want to cut down population, you've got to kill the does.

Well, my feminist friends, we're the does. We can't reduce the size of those sperm whale balloons. We can only reduce their number, and women of imagination need to come up with some very good ideas, very soon. Those of us in this room may not be here when they start killing the does, but our granddaughters will be.

Sheri Tepper was the Guest of honor at the 1998 WisCon22 Science Fiction Convention. The first half of her speech was printed in the September 1998 issue of *Feminist Voices*.