NERDS OF A FEATIER FLOGK TOGETHER

BOOK REVIEWS FEMINIST FUTURES SPOTLICHT ON HORROR ...AND MORE:





BEST FANZINE HUGO FINALIST VOTER PACKET

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JOE SHERRY

For a third year, we are a finalist for the Hugo Award and that is not something I could have imagined when I first joined the team here at Nerds of a Feather. I know that I speak for Vance and The G when I say that we are honored and humbled to recognize that we continue to be part of the history of the Hugo Award and part of the fan tradition in science fiction and fantasy.

Joining Nerds of a Feather in 2015 was one of the most surprising and rewarding decisions I had made in twelve years of fan writing at my own single author blog. Twelve years in blog time is almost an eternity. I never had a specific goal that I was working towards beyond a vague impossible dream of the Hugo Award, and the community that I had enjoyed in the "early days" had splintered with blogs closing and other writers following other paths. The scene had changed and I missed the energy of a vibrant community. I was as close to stepping away from fan writing as I had ever been, but becoming a part of this team was reinvigorating. I was filed with an energy and passion I had thought long lost.

The most important word in the preceding paragraph is "team" because that is the true strength and the true beauty of Nerds of a Feather. There are twelve active writers and together we all have built a small community, something special and full of energy. It is the full and equal contributions from each writer that gives us our foundation for success, and I wouldn't have the opportunity to write this essay without the daily excellence these writers contribute.

Adri Joy, Brian, Chloe Clark, Dead E.S. Richard, Joe Sherry, Michael Newhouse-Bailey, Paul Weimer, Phoebe Wagner, Spacefaring Kitten, The G, Vance Kotrla, Sean.

We have a crack team of writers here at Nerds of a Feather and I could not be prouder of the work they produced in 2018.

Every writer here at Nerd of a Feather is a *fan* of science fiction and fantasy. We've been reading and watching and thinking about spaceships and wizards and dragons and visions of the future and impossible creatures and robots and magic and maybe even magic robots. We loved sharing our passion with anybody who would listen, and sometimes even with those who would not. We remember first seeing that rocket logo on the cover of some of the books we loved so much and wondering what it was all about, but knowing that it *meant* something special. It *still* means something special. "Hugo Award Winner" are three incredible words, but three words just as treasured are "Hugo Award Finalist". Nerds of a Feather is now a three time Hugo Award Finalist and we fully appreciate that we stand both in the footprints and on the shoulders of giants.

Though an award for Best Fanzine was not given out at the first Hugo ceremony at the 1953 Worldcon, fanzines were included at the second Hugo Award ceremony two years later in 1955. It was one of only six Hugo Awards given out that year (for those historically minded, Fantasy-Times won). Except for 1958, Best Fanzine has been given out every year since. Fanzines have been (and still are) a vital and prominent part of the rich tradition of science fiction and fantasy and of fandom itself.

Nerds of a Feather follows not only in the blazing trails of the blog styled fanzines of SF Signal, A Dribble of Ink, and Lady Business, but of every fanzine that has come before us and kept community and conversation going. We follow in the footsteps of Fantasy-Times, of Yandro and Locus and Janus and File 770, of Emerald City and Mimosa and Banana Wings and Journey Planet. We are proud to be part of this fan tradition, of being a small part of a larger genre conversation.

Our contributions in 2018 to that larger conversation include:

*Feminist Futures: a major initiative looking at landmark works of feminist science fiction and fantasy

*Frankenstein at 200: celebrating 200 years of Frankenstein, Vance considers the novel and the two James Whale directed movies in four essays.

*Eco-Speculation: a series of essays on the intersection of speculative fiction and the environment

**Horror 101: Chloe Clark continues her high level look at the horror genre*

*Author Interviews

*New Books Spotlight

*Long and Short Form Reviews

*Personal Essays

*Thursday Morning Superhero: A weekly look at new comic books

*Westworld Wednesdays: a limited run weekly feature covering each episode of the show's second season

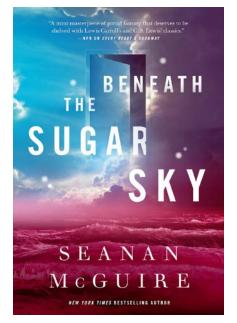
*Coverage of board games, video games, and so much more

What follows is a collection of some of our work from 2018 that we believe represents the core of what Nerds of a Feather is all about. If you are new to Nerds of a Feather, welcome. We hope that you'll be as thrilled to discover these reviews and essays as we are to share them with you. If you are already familiar with Nerds of a Feather, we'd like to thank you for coming along on this journey with us. We wouldn't be here without you.

FICTION REVIEWS

MICROREVIEW [BOOK]: BENEATH THE SUGAR SKY, BY SEANAN MCGUIRE JOE SHERRY

A feeling of homecoming with great adventure



Seanan McGuire's Hugo Award winning novella Every Heart a Doorway (my review) introduced readers to Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children, something of a boarding school / halfway house for children who have gone through portals and adventured beyond wardrobes and down rabbit holes. Back home these children never quite fit in, never found a place they felt they belonged. Through the doorways, they mattered. In these other worlds, they belonged.

Beneath the Sugar Sky is the third Wayward Children novella from Seanan McGuire, and it brings back much of the feeling of Every Heart a Doorway after stepping deep into the origin story of Jack and Jill in Down Among the Sticks and Bones (my review). There is more of the sense of nostalgia from the first book, but also a much greater sense of adventure.

I should also note that I read almost the entire book with my newborn daughter Cora resting on my shoulder, so there was an added layer of poignancy reading a story with a protagonist also named Cora. A protagonist, I might add, who never belonged and never fit in - which is how she found her way to Eleanor West's after returning to the "real" world. My heart ached for her and for my own daughter, barely two weeks old when I read Beneath the Sugar Sky.

Seanan McGuire spends more time at Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Girls, so Beneath the Sugar Sky feels more like a homecoming. This leads, of course to the comfortable ache of so many of these children finding a world of their own where they could truly belong.

She sometimes thought that might be the one piece of true magic this world possessed: so many children had found their way home while in her care, and yet not a single parent had accused her of wrongdoing, or attempted to launch and investigation into the disappearance of their beloved offspring

One of the things I most appreciate about the Wayward Children novellas is how McGuire demonstrates the need for and the power of acceptance for children who may be different and feel like they don't fit in. Cora is an overweight child and before she found her doorway and before she arrived at Eleanor West's, she was judged exactly the way one might expect she would be. But her reality is that she's an athlete. She's an expert swimmer and she can run fast and far. When she went through her doorway, she was a mermaid and a hero.

Suddenly she'd been a hero, brave and bright and beloved.

But even when Cora returned to Eleanor West's, the other children are not mean in the same way they might be in a regular school. "It was like they had all learned to be a little kinder, or at least a little more careful about what they based their judgments on", McGuire writes, which is important to see. It's not that everyone likes each other or non judgmental, but it's more that those judgments may be based more on who a person is than what the person looks like.

But this is also an adventure story, not simply a lesson in morality (though, as lessons go, it's a really good one). Cora and some of the other children go on an adventure that hops between worlds. Time is spent in the Underworld and we get to visit with Nancy again and see just how blissfully happy she is having found her doorway again. That ending of Every Heart a Doorway is fully paid off here.

Most of the time, though, is spent in a sugary sweet world of logical nonsense. The entire world is a confection, layered and layered by pastry. There is a sea of strawberry rhubarb soda, of which Cora astutely points out that they would all "get horrible urinary tract infections" after swimming in it, which is a nice touch for how this might be a Nonsense world - but there's real thought behind it. "She needs to stop being dead and come home and have sex until I exist again!"

The story of Beneath the Sugar Sky is a quest to bring back to life one of the children murdered in Every Heart a Doorway because her daughter would really like to be born and exist. It's sort of complicated and laced with Nonsense, but somehow Rini was able to travel to Eleanor West's after her mother was murdered there, which occurred before Rini was born. I know, it doesn't make all that much sense to me either (or to any of the characters in Beneath the Sugar Sky for that matter), but it works well enough because Rini and her mother were from the Nonsense world of Confection and the rules are different there. Remember the strawberry rhubarb soda sea.

"Why do people always say that?" muttered Cora, trailing along at the rear of the group. "There's always more than one way to find something out. People only say there's only one way when they want an excuse to do something incredibly stupid without getting called on it

Beneath the Sugar Sky is filled with wit and biting commentary on how children are perceived and all too often squeezed into boxes they don't belong in order to fit the ideas and dreams of their parents and other adults, and how pervasive that can be. It's also a delightful adventure story filled with charm and wonder and it's a book I did not quite want to end because I wasn't ready to say goodbye.

There is kindness in the world, if we know how to look for it. If we never start denying it the door. That's a good place to leave it, I think.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 8/10

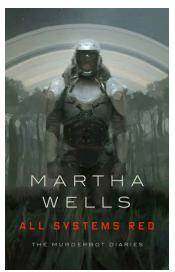
Bonuses: +1 because McGuire digs a bit deeper into the nature of these worlds, how they interact, and in some cases - how they might have been formed. It's more than just knowing there are plenty of weird worlds out that there that fit the needs of various children. They may be equally as real as Earth and that Earth has its own rules on the chart

Penalties: No.

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10, "very high quality/standout in its category."

A ROBOT LEARNS TO LOVE ITSELF: REFLECTING ON THE MURDERBOT DIARIES BY MARTHA WELLS ADRI JOY

The Murderbot Diaries is an AI self-actualisation story which takes us far beyond the basic "can a robot feel?" question that is still the standard starting point for these kinds of tales.



There's a moment near the start of Rogue Protocol, the third in Martha Wells' Murderbot Diaries series (forthcoming August 7, 2018 from Tor.com Publishing), that quietly broke my heart. The self-proclaimed Murderbot, a rogue SecUnit (a human-robot hybrid "construct") which hacked its own governor module after an unfortunate murder-based incident that was subsequently wiped from its memory, is trying to distract itself from the endless, stupid problems of humans by watching a new show. Unfortunately, the plot isn't working out, and Murderbot is eager to get within range of a station so it can download something different. If only, it tells us, this terraforming horror series had a rogue SecUnit character who could stop the squishy humans from all getting horribly killed...

On the surface, this doesn't seem like a big deal. Murderbot watches rather a lot of shows – indeed, extensive media consumption is its most prominent character quirk – and it also does a lot of complaining, so the combination of the two is not exactly unusual. However, this is the first time it has articulated a desire to see itself represented positively in media. In the previous book, Artificial Condition, Murderbot had explained to its new "friend" ART the Asshole Research Transport (long story) why their favourite TV show is Sanctuary Moon, a show in a setting with no SecUnits or security issues at all. ART's favourite shows, in contrast, all tend to involve spaceships protecting their humans. Rogue SecUnits in media are all portrayed terrible monsters, because, it thinks, that's a rational way of looking at rogue SecUnits in general. To even fantasize about the existence of a heroic rogue SecUnit one book later is a serious step forward for Murderbot, even if it doesn't acknowledge the change of heart itself.

It's this constant grappling with the character's identity and self-worth that really lifts the Murderbot Diaries (a series which began with last year's Nebula winning, Hugo nominated All Systems Red, and is due to wrap up later this year with Exit Strategy) from being a merely hilarious story about a cynical construct to being something rather special. Like Moon, the central character in The Books of the Raksura (Martha Wells' other Hugo finalist this year), Murderbot is a convincingly non-human person who blends recognisable emotional responses with occasionally very alien reactions and behaviours; both are outsiders who find themselves offered friendship and community but have to learn how to accept it. In telling story it does, the Murderbot Diaries also turns the traditional robot narrative on its head: Murderbot isn't a robot learning to feel, it's a robot who is already all but overwhelmed by its emotions and has to learn how to manage and express them in a galaxy where many people still treat it as an unthinking tool.

And while Murderbot has it worse than most, it's apparent that a lot of people in this universe – be they humans, bots or something in between - are similarly struggling to establish their right to live and flourish beyond their usefulness to all-powerful corporations, who are not above mass murder to get what they want. When we first meet Murderbot in All Systems Red, it's been hired out to an uninhabited planet with a group of naive but (it grudgingly admits) likeable humans who are conducting a survey, when they find themselves in the middle of a highly subtle corporate assassination attempt. Murderbot, who has already gone rogue by this point but is pretending to be compliant, ends up accidentally "outing" itself as a fully realised sentient when it has to evacuate an injured party member, and spends the rest of the mission attempting to rebuff attempts - particularly from the mission leader, Dr. Mensah - to talk to it about its feelings and treat it like a person.

Murderbot is quick to tell us that this is because it doesn't want to make the humans uncomfortable, and the reader just as quickly realises that this is a planet-sized act of projection on our hero's part. Faced with a group of people with no preconceived notions of what a SecUnit should be, who discover that it's not a heavily armoured machine but a being with a human face, the ability to conduct caring small talk, and a massive addiction to trashy soap operas, means Murderbot suddenly has to cope with being treated like a person, forced to earn trust and friendship from its coworkers and treated accordingly when it does. To someone who has thus far dealt with being emotionally sensitive by insisting that nobody cares and hiding itself behind an opaque visor, this change is nearly impossible to process.

Because behind the sarcastic asides and wry commentary, Murderbot's narration is a veritable bingo sheet of unhelpful thinking styles; its propensity to internal self-sabotage is both relateable and excruciating to watch. Everything Murderbot does right is disqualified from positive consideration because it's just what SecUnits do, while everything that goes wrong is a total disaster that's all its fault. All of Murderbot's strengths are flukes or basic programming, while its weaknesses are all-consuming. Because Murderbot is very anxious around people, people must be objectively difficult things (except in media, where they are fascinating and enjoyable). All Rogue SecUnits are terrifying, terrible individuals who are very rightly the villains whenever they appear in media, and would be awful to meet in real life. Oh, and of course it's labelled itself Murderbot (and the first bot who sits down to watch TV with it "Asshole Research Transport"). While our hero does indeed recognise and label its own thinking as "anxiety", and can demonstrably think things through or talk itself down when required, the narration doesn't give us much second-order thought or self-reflection, leaving the mechanics of growth behind the scenes and leaving us with only subtle signs of growth behind Murderbot's aggressively curated self-image.

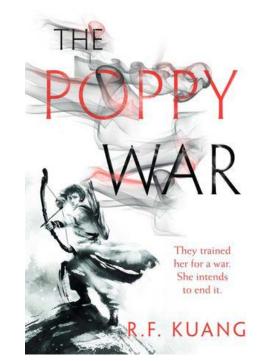
Later installments have Murderbot truly going rogue and, in the process, straying even further outside of its comfort zone, passing as human while it pieces together evidence against the company which attacked its humans and discovers more about its own past (including the event which led it to call itself "Murderbot" in the first place). Intentionally or otherwise, it finds itself spending more time with humans similar to Dr Mensah's group: people it ostensibly finds insufferable, naive and incapable of staying out of danger but who treat it like a person, even when the "augmented human" identity slips.

We also get interactions between Murderbot and other bots and constructs, most notably ART in Artificial Condition, and the irrepressibly friendly (and, apparently, extremely annoying) Miki the helper bot in Rogue Protocol. Murderbot is rather rude about both of these characters, especially Miki, who it dismisses as a "human's pet": a dismissal which likely reflects its feelings about being offered a similar choice earlier in the series, rather than being directly Miki's fault. However, even while it's calling its fellow bots assholes and pets, Murderbot is also completely willing to accept them as people and in many ways treats them the same as humans: trustworthy in some ways but likely to betray you when their "programming" requires it. Even bots with demonstrably low capability get treated with respect by Murderbot, although it always puts its own self-preservation first. We are led to suspect the only thing that isn't a person to Murderbot is Murderbot itself: an ironic conclusion for the character to arrive at, given its narration leaves the reader in no doubt that Murderbot is quite definitely "one of us".

The Murderbot Diaries is an AI self-actualisation story which takes us far beyond the basic "can a robot feel?" question that is still the standard starting point for these kinds of tales in SFF. The series presents us with a robot character who we immediately accept as a funny, cynical, highly competent and resourceful person, and who I suspect many of us would love to hang out with, even knowing it would probably complain internally and make up rude nicknames for us if we did. In doing so, The Murderbot Diaries gives itself room to ask more complex questions about the relationship between how we see our own personhood and self-worth compared to how others see us; and how to find healing, growth and self-expression even when all one wants to do is self-isolate. For Murderbot, it's a slow, frustrating journey, and one which is largely obscured by bluster and sarcasm. But when the moments of growth shine through - when the Murderbot accepts that it might just be hero material - it's are all the more poignant and exciting for being so hard-won.

MUSINGS ON THE POPPY WAR BY R. F. KUANG PHOEBE WAGNER

A grimdark fantasy with distinctly millennial undertones.



This post won't be so much a review as some musings since others, particularly S. Qiouyi Lu's review, capture the cultural and historical nuances of R. F. Kuang's The Poppy War better than I could. Even so, the book moved me enough I want to write about it, and as it gains more and more readership, I'm not alone in my championing of the book.

The novel opens with a test. The Keju determines the limited placement of students at the academies, and war orphan Rin totally aces the exam, meaning she's destined for military greatness if she doesn't wash out Sinegard, the premiere military academy. Everything gets in her way from her lack of family connections, childhood of poverty, and gender. She catches a break when the eccentric master Jiang takes special interest in her. While his shamanism seems too mystical to be useful, Rin changes her mind when she's visited by a god.

This description covers very little of the book, but I don't want to give too much away. One of the things I loved is Kuang's pacing. As suggested by the title, this book isn't only focused on Rin's early training but expands into the war that comes afterward. If reading that description reminded you of the most famous modern fantasy Name of the Wind by Patrick Rothfuss, then good. Kaung plays with many of the same beloved tropes from the eccentric mentor to Rin's academic struggles. That being said, Kuang brings a different point of view to these moments, such as what happens when Rin menstruates for the first time (Kvothe never had to deal with that).

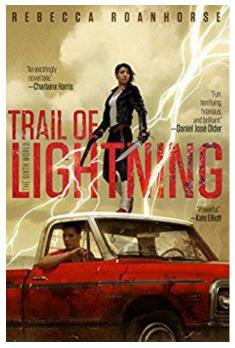
While I love fantasy novels like The Poppy War, Kuang's story has taken a special slot on my shelf because, as a millennial, I connected to the novel on a generational level. No, Kuang did not include avocado toast. From the voice to history to worldbuilding, the novel captured how I so often feel as a millennial. While the USA school testing systems are vastly different than Chinese systems, I remember the pressure of the SATs and GREs--and the relief at performing well. Like Rin, millennials grew up in the shadow of a terrorist attack and hearing the propaganda surrounding a war. Due to income inequality, those millennials that made it into "the good schools" found a cultural gap caused by wealth. Like Kuang's worldbuilding around opium and other hallucinogens, so many millennials have watched their hometowns and families destroyed by opioids while simultaneously voting for the legalization of marijuana. These issues have marked the millennial generation, and Kuang captures them on the page.

A final element worth mentioning is Kuang's voice. Now don't get me wrong, I love me some fantasy language. I will fight anyone who complains that Tolkien is "stilted." The Poppy War walks the line of traditional fantasy language but with updates, such as this line from Rin's mentor Jiang when another master suggests Jiang should consider what people would say about him training Rin alone: "Probably that a master of [my] rank and standing could do much better than dicking around with female students." I'm pretty sure most 500+ page fantasies do not use the word "dicking." Of course Kuang's voice expands beyond slang to the dialogue, humor, pacing, and sentence structure.

The Poppy War is the modern fantasy I've been wishing for. As a fantasy reader and writer, I believe in the genre's power to provide a new lens to view and explore societal issues. R. F. Kuang uses the genre to capture the struggles of millennials in a grimdark book that any reader of modern fantasy will enjoy.

MICROREVIEW [BOOK]: TRAIL OF LIGHTNING, BY REBECCA ROANHORSE PAUL WEIMER

Trail of Lightning is an electric debut with a post-apocalyptic world, a kickass heroine, and her adrenaline-fueled ride through that landscape.



After a spectacular and very likely supernatural apocalypse that has drowned much of the world, much of North America is underwater and much of the remainder that isn't is a mess. The land inside of what was the Navajo Reservation is protected by a quartet of magical walls. And yet even inside of the boundaries of the walls, in this new world, there are monsters, and monstrous people, and such dangers and threats must be addressed, and fought.

That's where Maggie Hoskie comes in. She's been trained as a monster hunter by the very best, but she is new to fighting monsters on her own. And it is in the fighting monsters on her own that she is drawn into a plot that will not only gain her a partner, but also uncover a threat to the entire world inside the walls and the people who live there. Can Maggie protect herself, and those around her, when she must also restrain an even greater monster--herself? And just what DID happen to her old mentor, anyhow?

This is the central question at the heart of Rebecca

Roanhorse's debut novel, Trail of Lightning.

There is plenty to love in Trail of Lighting, and Maggie as a main character is front and center the heart of the novel and she makes the novel sing. An indigenous woman granted supernatural powers that are complicated and make her an outsider by their very nature, Maggie's life as a newly solo monster hunter is a fraught one. The author writes her action beats very well, and when Maggie takes the stage as a fighter, the novel positively sings. Through those action beats, and the first person point of view, we get a really intense look at Maggie as a character, how she sees herself, how others do, and the sometimes fraught relationship between those two visions.

The second major character in the novel, Kai, a rather unconventional hero. Thanks to the nature of the character, and the plot, and the secrets that Kai is hiding, he is somewhat difficult to get a handle on as a character. I think that the author may have made Kai just a tad too slippery for readers to get a good enough purchase on for my taste. As the novel progresses, we get to see why Kai is the way he is and the relevance of that to the plot, but I think a little more hook on him would have been good.

The worldbuilding is top notch and a leading light of the power of #ownvoices. There is an authenticity to the myths and legends made supernatural manifest fact within the Sixth World that the author presents here. This is a post-apocalyptic world whose supernatural denizens, threats and features felt like the author was truly delving deep into her own culture, understanding it and presenting it to us in context and the richness of what is on offer. And much of it is new to most readers and rich with details and ideas that I was very happy to have the author explore. I particularly liked her interpretation of Coyote, the Trickster, who has an agenda for Maggie that only slowly becomes clear as the novel unfolds. But it is the things that go bump in the night, the entities that Maggie must encounter and fight, that shows the author's invention the best.

The worldbuilding also extends to the non supernatural elements as well. From the vividly described desert landscapes in what used to be the Navajo Reservation, to the people who inhabit it, I got a deep sense of place and people in reading the novel. As I read the novel, I found myself consulting Google Maps time and again, and turning on the Satellite image to get an even better view of where events took place. The author also invoked a more than mild desire for me to one day see the real life terrain and meet the people who live there. There are also a number of set piece locations that the novel is built around, that serve as hubs or tentpoles where the novel's major scenes takes place. I particularly like Grace's All-American, one of the few bars left, and built like a fortress. Grace and her family are quite the distinctive characters,. too.

There are some small flaws in the novel, however. It is very clearly a first novel, and its pacing and plotting can get a little herky-jerky in places. The action beats as mentioned above are strong and rich, but sometimes the connective tissue isn't quite what it could be, and it sometimes meanders, without strong compensative character development at the same time. The novel, in fact, definitely does best in character development during those action beats.

Still, I look forward to what Roanhorse does in the next Sixth World novels, and hope that some of the roughness of the first novel wears off and she only improves on the strengths of this novel.

Find out more about Rebecca Roanhorse and her work in our Six Books Feature.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10

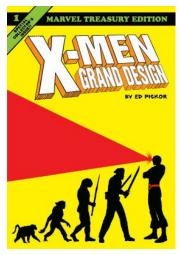
Bonuses: +1 for a deep dive into an intriguing main character; +1 for an inventive and well described world

Penalties: -1 for some first novel pacing and plotting issues.

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10: well worth your time and attention

MICROREVIEW [COMIC]: X-MEN: GRAND DESIGN BY ED PISKOR SPACEFARING KITTEN

New, shining translation of the Old X-Testament



It is debatable whether the mainstream superhero comics by major publishers have managed to do anything super-exciting lately, but there is still one subject only a Marvel comic can do justice to – the convoluted, messy, contradictory continuity of Marvel comics themselves. X-Men: Grand Design by cartoonist Ed Piskor takes a closer look at the mutants who Stan Lee and Jack Kirby turned loose in 1963.

In the beginning, Cyclops, Iceman, Angel, Beast and Marvel Girl were teens in the shadow of Cuban missile crisis. You'd think that 55 years later they should have received their X-pensions already, but that's not how it works in their line of business, and most of them are still running around in spandex in 2018. A lot has went down since then, however – Beast is now blue and furry, Iceman is gay, Angel has lost his wings and Marvel Girl has died several times – and cataloguing all that is Piskor's mission in Grand Design.

It's a fascinating project, and part of what makes it so fascinating is how utterly unlikely it is. The alternative comics creator Piskor – probably best known for the hip hop culture documentary Hip Hop Family Tree and his work for Harvey Pekar's American Splendor – is certainly not among the people you'd guess Marvel would hire to document X-History, but here we are. It's a weird hybrid: the subject matter of X-Men: Grand Design is as mainstream as it gets, but the look and feel are definitely alt comics. The series is published as individual comics issues but it probably makes more sense to dive into it with the big-page paperbacks that are scheduled to come out after every second issue. The first of them collects X-Men: Grand Design issues 1 and 2 as well as Lee and Kirby's X-Men #1, recolored by Piskor. Toning down the garish colors gives a nice touch to Kirby's art and makes its atmosphere surprisingly close to Piskor's own strips.

The first two issues of Grand Design that are collected here cram between their covers most of what happened in the first 66 X-Men comic books – that's every notable X-Incident between 1963 and 1970 when X-Sales were so bad that Marvel turned X-Men into a reprint comic book for years. In the mid-70s, Len Wein, Chris Claremont and Dave Cockrum would kickstart the title and it would finally become one of Marvel's (and Disney's) major properties, but the first book deals with those 66 issues.

Some of them are summarized with one panel, others with several pages, but Piskor mostly manages to make the fragmentary narrative smooth for the reader. Wolverine, Storm, Phoenix Force and other later additions were not yet present in the comics that are Piskor's source material here, but he goes through everything chronologically, so they make small appearances in addition to the actual, original X-Men. Also present are Banshee, Polaris, Havok and nowadays mostly forgotten Mimic who were all members or at least semi-members of the group at some point in the 60s.

The X-Men have slowly accumulated a gigantic backstory during the last 55 years, so it actually takes Piskor the entirety of his first issue to get us where we are at the beginning of the original X-Men #1 – if we get there at all, that is. It is interestingly a bit unclear if Lee and Kirby's first adventure (which is summarized on the second page of Grand Design #2) is compatible with Piskor's rendition despite it being included in the collection, because all of it doesn't add up if you look at the details too hard. For some readers, that may be a disappointment, but I'm fairly sure that with a project like this, the result is more enjoyable if your approach is that of an artist with a vision as opposed to that of a biblical scholar.

In that holiest of holy X-texts Professor Xavier's teenage mutant superhero boys meet Jean Grey for the first time and fight off Magneto who makes his supervillain debut hijacking some missiles. In this adventure, Jean Grey does not have her psychic powers yet (just as Superman could only take long leaps in his first adventures), and so she can only throw some missiles into the sea telekinetically. In Piskor's retelling, conversely, she is already there when Henry Soon-To-Be-Beast McCoy is kidnapped by supervillain Conquistador and his henchmen. When Cyclops, Iceman and Angel run into trouble freeing McCoy, Xavier sends in Jean Grey to help them. Upon arrival, she turns Conquistador and his minions into drooling vegetables and makes it clear from the first appearance that she is a force to be taken seriously, not only a token female X-Man with a little softer superpower than his male colleagues.

This is one example of the creative freedoms Piskor has taken, and the book is probably stronger because of them. Still, the project is not about surface detail but the grand design, and reading the comic is a peculiar experience. On some level, you understand that the details and specifics of how exactly something happened are unimportant in a work such as this, even though the things Piskor played around with more or less unorthodoxically are probably going to draw most attention.

Diplomatically speaking, some of the original material that Piskor is covering here is not among the most memorable in X-History. I'm sure that most readers are waiting for the following volumes where we get to some of the juicier storylines, like Dark Phoenix Saga, Inferno, Mutant Massacre and what have you. Part of the attraction, I guess, is seeing how Piskor is going to get some of the more massive and significant events of the Claremont era compressed into their essence and fitted into the overarching narrative – I have absolutely no idea how that can ever be pulled off.

The Math

Base Score: 9/10

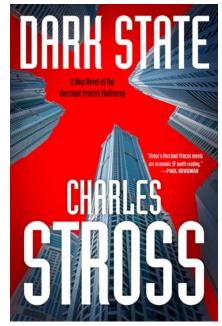
Bonuses: +1 for visionary storytelling mindset

Penalties: -1 occasionally, there's just too much to take in at once. -1 for weaker source than the forthcoming parts of the series

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10 – "Well worth your time and attention"

MICROREVIEW [BOOK]: DARK STATE, BY CHARLES STROSS JOE SHERRY

Return to the Multiverse.



My experience of reading Charles Stross is a persistent struggle between the quality of his ideas and my perception of the quality of his writing, which is to say that I seldom find that the writing lives up to the promise of the ideas.

When I wrote about Empire Games (my review), I noted "the level of Stross's writing is actually beginning to rise to the level of his ideas" and that once Stross got the story rolling, nothing distracted from the cool ideas of the world walking between the worlds we've already known and the opening up of new worlds and the drama of the how the United States interacts with the world walkers from a parallel universe.

Dark State picks up almost immediately after the conclusion of Empire Games, and despite the increasingly breakneck pace of the second half of that novel, Dark State suffers from some of the same issues that Empire Games did. Stross spends at least a third of Dark State resetting the playing field and planting the seeds for where the rest of the novel and trilogy will go. That's fine, as far as narrative conventions go, but Stross is not at his best as a writer when working with a more deliberate pace.

The A and B stories of Dark State are probably first

that of Rita, the daughter of Miriam Beckstein (from the original Merchant Princes series) who was given up for adoption as an infant, but who has an unlocked world walking trait and who was recruited by the United States government to both infiltrate and liaise with the alternate timeline which has the former Clan in a position of power; and second, that of Elizabeth Hanover, a princess of from that alternate timeline looking to escape a life with an arranged marriage and defect to the Clan led government in New London. I'm grossly simplifying the story lines, of course, and Stross develops each of them far beyond what I've given, but we know from Empire Games (and the Merchant Princes) that the United States will go farther and go darker in their plans to "protect the Homeland". That definitely is a factor here and it permeates almost everything in Dark State.

As with Empire Games, when Charles Stross decides he wants to move the story, the interesting stuff happens. I'm engaged as a reader, he's not giving the reader much time to take a breath and he's making stuff happen. It's when he is in set up mode, we see the clunk. Dark State is not as acronym heavy as past Stross novels, though there are references to BLACK RAIN and such, but there are moments early in the novel which feel overly didactic. Those moments come across less as storytelling and more as just telling.

In ways that are completely typical for reading a Charles Stross novel, I can only say that I was less annoyed as the novel progressed – to the point that I only noticed very late in the novel that I was finally engrossed in the story being told. I don't know that it was good, in whatever nebulous way I describe a good novel, but it was better than how Dark State began. This is nearly always the case with Charles Stross. Whether it is reengaging with his particular brand of flow or if it is just waiting for that moment he decides to stop revving the novel's engine and punch the gas, I like the ride when he's moving.

Dark State has left me far more conflicted about the new trilogy than Empire Games did. I'm not sure if it was the excitement of stepping back into Merchant Princes or if it was that Stross seemed to have leveled up a bit since he last stepped into this world, but Dark State does not quite live up to the promise of the previous novel. Readers are still left with plenty of interest in how Stross will wrap things up and interest in what new cool stuff he will introduce and tweak. The ideas in Dark State remain as fascinating and involving as ever. It's just what he does with his ideas that do not measure up.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 6/10

Bonuses: +1 the stuff in timeline four with the destroyed Earth through the portal adds an extra bit of intrigue to what might be going on with the other unexplored timelines.

Penalties: -1 clunk clunk clunk.

Nerd Coefficient: 6/10, "still enjoyable, but the flaws are hard to ignore"

FEMINIST FUTURES

FEMINIST FUTURES: AN INTRODUCTION CHLOE CLARK, JOE SHERRY



Perhaps bolstered by the success of Hulu's television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's seminal 1985 novel The Handmaid's Tale, and perhaps because of the rising tide of anger, fear, and apprehension over and about what path to the future we seem to be on, there is a renewed groundswell of feminist science fiction in popular culture today.

We may be living in a new golden age of feminist science fiction (and of science fiction in general), but it is important to note and remember that feminist science fiction has never gone away. It has been an integral part of science fiction from the very beginning. The nature and the place of the conversation it has engendered and facilitated may have shifted depending on the era, but it has always been here.

Feminist science fiction has never gone away, but we have a damnable habit of forgetting those who have come before, especially those voices that were not among those few writers we still talk about decades later as if they were the only voices that mattered.

First and Second Wave Feminist Science Fiction

In the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction entry on feminism, writers Helen Merrick and Lisa Tuttle point out that beginning in the late 1970's critics have considered "feminist sf within a longer history stretching back to Nineteenth-century Utopian works that arose as part of the movement for women's rights. Unlike the utopias of male writers, these fictions always question the sexual status quo and foreground the position of women"

This stretches the history of feminist science fiction

back to novels such as A Few Hours in a Far-Off Age (Henrietta Dugdale, 1883) and A Week in the Future (Catherine Helen Spence (1889), as well as the somewhat more remembered Herland from Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which was serialized in The Forerunner Magazine in 1915 (and republished in novel form in 1979). There are many other examples, but Merrick and Tuttle note that "this utopian tradition in women's writing had been mostly forgotten in subsequent decades until its rediscovery by feminist scholars in the 1970's".

Those early utopian feminist novels are considered part of the first wave of feminist science fiction. Like those early feminist utopias, the second wave of feminist science fiction also looked to question the "sexual status quo and foreground the position of women", but these later writers did so in ways that were far less optimistic and often far grimmer. The writers of the second wave often looked at issues and problems they saw in their present and pushed the ideas out as far as they could go to see what that might look like. The second wave of feminist science fiction was larger, louder, and left an indelible mark on the genre itself.

In her essay "An Open Letter to Joanna Russ" (originally published in Aurora, Issue 25), Jeanne Gomoll notes that

"It was not one or two or a mere scattering of women, after all, who participated in women's renaissance in science fiction. It was a great BUNCH of women: too many to discourage or ignore individually, too good to pretend to be flukes. In fact, their work was so pervasive, so obvious, so influential, and they won so many of the major awards that their work demands to be considered centrally as one looks back on the 70's and early 80's. They broadened the scope of SF extrapolation from mere technology to include social and personal themes as well. Their work and their (our) concerns are of central importance to any remembered history or critique."

It is worth noting here that Aurora (originally titled Janus) was only the second feminist science fiction fanzine to be published (26 issues published between 1975-1990), the first being the very short lived fanzine The Witch and the Chameleon by Amanda Bankier (5 issues published between 1974-1976).

Some of the authors debuting during that second wave of feminist science fiction are giants and legends of the field, though even some of those may be better known simply by name and reputation than active and current reading of the works. There may be none bigger and more important than Ursula K. Le Guin. Her novels The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed are right considered classics and masterworks. We won't list out the award recognition for every author in this introduction, but Le Guin is in a class by herself, having won 7 Hugo Awards (most recently in 2018), 6 Nebula Awards (not counting the one she declined in protest), 3 World Fantasy Awards, a staggering 22 Locus Awards, a National Book Award, and she was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. We won't count the number of nominations Le Guin has received.

Ursula K. Le Guin is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to major feminist writers from the 1970's. In some ways Joanna Russ may be best known now for her literary criticism and for her nonfiction work How to Suppress Women's Writing. Of course, The Female Man is a title that nearly every serious reader of science fiction has heard of, whether or not they have read it. Likewise, James Tiptree, Jr (Alice Sheldon) is another writer remembered more by name than by work (and for having the Tiptree Award named after her), though her story "The Women Men Don't See" is counted among the legendary works of science fiction.

This, of course, raises the question: remembered and read by whom? Readers today focused on the new and shiny and who are engaged in the impossible task of keeping up on the field likely are not reading the major writers of the 1970's and even beyond. After all, that is more than forty years in the past. How many important writers or films or songs from forty years ago have truly remained embedded in the public consciousness? Those paying attention to the history of the genre will know the writers who remained important and they will know those who did and who should have remained in the public conversation. Names like Margaret Atwood, Sheri S. Tepper, Octavia E. Butler, Suzy McKee Charnas, Vonda McIntyre, Pamela Sargent, Eleanor Arnason, Suzette Haden Elgin, Marge Piercy, Angela Carter, Carol Emswhiller, Katherine V. Forrest, Donna J. Young, Jayge Carr, Joan Slonczewski, and Joan Vinge.

Many of those names (and an equal number not mentioned here) may be familiar to readers. That Vonda McIntyre is not often discussed in the fanzines and spaces we frequent does not mean that her novels Dreamsnake or Superliminal have been forgotten or that they are not read. Dreamsnake is, after all, a winner of both the Hugo and Nebula Award. While not quite rare, that is still a distinction only twenty three other novels can make.

We asked "remembered and read by whom?" and it is a nearly impossible question. There is no true metric to know that a reader of Ann Leckie's Ancillary Justice is not also a reader of Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time or that a reader of Mary Robinette Kowal's The Calculating Stars is not also a reader actively working through the four novels of The Holdfast Chronicles from Suzy McKee Charnas. We recognize that when a list of major feminist science fiction writers is put together, there are certain names that frequently are mentioned and when the label feminist is dropped so are most of those writers.

These writers provide both a direct and indirect line of influence to so many important science fiction writers of today, feminist or otherwise.

Feminist Science Fiction Today

If the past of feminist writing is grounded in ways in which the future looks towards bleakness, what about the present of feminist futuristic and speculative writing? What are the futures we imagine for ourselves now that we've seen the ways in which the world has and, more importantly, has not advanced? In what ways has this shifted—do strides in one area override the lack of movement, the struggles, in another? Are the futures we imagine too bleak? Or are they not bleak enough? Not angry enough?

The feminist writers of now are imagining futures at once both bleak and filled with light. These futures seem to say: don't imagine that it can't get better, but do know that it probably won't.

Janelle Monae's Dirty Computer imagines a future as constricting and smothering as the present, all while floating an undercurrent of hope---will love get us through? Can we fight what's being crushed upon us? How do we do that? The album Dirty Computer ends on a rallying cry, the film that goes along with it ends on a note of devastation. This duality reflects the future of feminist sci-fi writing, which seems to balance every ray of hope with one of acceptance that the world rarely gets better.

In Lidia Yuknavitch's Book of Joan—the future is bleak but hope can be found in a Joan of Arc-like reimagining that hinges on the power of voices and words as well as the horror of reproductive control being manipulated by those with power. This can be seen as an update of Handmaid's Tale---for a world in which reproductive rights and people's control of their bodies and gender identities are still heavily contested.

In Rivers Solomon's An Unkindness of Ghosts, the plantation era is reimagined in space in the story of Aster

who works to uncover the mysteries of the ship they are on as well as the trauma and history of their own past. The novel not only talks about race in compelling ways, but also questions gender binaries and the rigidness of the male versus female dynamic. This is a novel that is not only filled with beautifully examined queerness, but also forces us to contend with the powers of language as both agent of freedom and agent of oppression.

Other writers such as Carmen Maria Machado, Nnedi Okorafor, NK Jemisin, and more, struggle with many of the same questions. Their works imagine a future that could be brighter, but requires fight and strength and hope in order to get there. These futures are also not only the predominately white and straight feminisms of the earlier era. They are futures in which all sexualities, gender identities, and races are being represented. Even if the writing itself paints a bleak future, the hope can be found in the voices whose stories are finally getting the chance to speak these futures.

Feminist Futures

In her essay "For a Genealogy of Feminist SF: Reflections on Women, Feminism, and Science Fiction, 1818-1960", L. Timmel Duchamp argues for feminist science fiction as part of a grand conversation within (and beyond) the genre.

"It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever shifting, fluid mosaic."

We envision Feminist Futures to be a small part of that grand conversation. With this project we aim to explore just a tiny fraction of the monumental feminist science fiction that has been written. We have a particular focus in discussing some of the major feminist science fiction works of the 1970's and the 1980's as part of that second wave of feminist science fiction.

Through dossier reviews and essays, we will look at the works of Ursula K. Le Guin and Joanna Russ and James Tiptree and Sally Miller Gearheart and Pamela Sargent and Suzy McKee Charnas and more. We expect to also touch on some of the more modern writers such as Nicola Griffith, Ann Leckie, L. Timmel Duchamp, and Kameron Hurley. We'll explore novels and anthologies and short stories. We'll have personal reflections and a look into the experience of attending Wiscon, the feminist science fiction convention.

We have so much planned, and even if we're able to hit the mark and write about everything we would like to, we're still going to miss so much. We are limited by the time it takes to put all this together, by just being unfamiliar with some major writers who we will then just miss. We know that Feminist Futures is only going to scratch the bare surface of feminist science fiction. We know that we're going to get some stuff wrong and we'll do our best to correct those mistakes. We also recognize that it is nearly impossible for a reader in 2018 to read a work from 1972, 1982, or even 1992 with the same cultural context with which it was written and by which it would have been understood by its contemporary readers. We are limited by the context of our own experiences and our own histories. We are ready for the challenge.

The exciting thing about Feminist Futures is the opportunity it has given us to visit and revisit some of these raw classics of the genre and push us to read more and wider than we might otherwise have done when focused on the new shiny. The ramifications for what we cover and talk about on Nerds of a Feather may well stretch far beyond the bounds of Feminist Futures.

The Dossier Reviews for Feminist Futures will have the following subheadings to focus our commentary.

File Type: Whether the work is a book, film, game, etc

Executive Summary: Plot summary

Feminist Future: How the work blends feminism with science fiction or fantasy.

Hope for the Future: Regardless of whether the work initially presents a feminist hellscape, does it also offer any sort of hope for a better world after? If so, how?

Legacy: The importance of the work in question

In Retrospect: An editorial commentary on how good / not good the work is from the vantage point of 2018.

Through the dossier reviews and essays, we look to engage with that grand conversation surrounding feminist science fiction and reflect on how some of those masterworks and seminal works of feminist science fiction are remembered today and how they are might be read by a modern reader.

"We felt as though we had become involved in a conversation - which was probably due to the texts themselves tending to be distinctly reflexive and dialogical and constantly demanding of their readers immediate reflections on what it means to be a woman in the world as it is and how different the world could become, depending on what women might do or become." - L. Timmel Duchamp

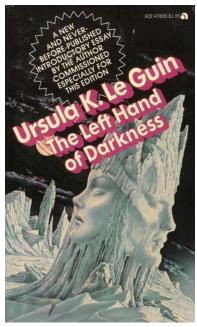
Welcome to Feminist Futures.

Beginning October 29, 2018, Feminist Futures will run every Monday, Wednesday and Friday through Thanksgiving and possibly into December.

Feminist Separatism In Science Fiction ADRI JOY

Content Warning: This essay tackles multiple texts which conflate sex and gender, and erase trans and intersex people.

The past dreams of a female-only future...



Men, eh. What a mess they make. What a bother it is, to have this whole category of people on the planet who march around like they own the place yet mess it up at every opportunity, can't change a baby, can't do their own laundry, can't even get in touch with their own emotions unless it involves some form of anger or violence. What trouble they cause for the rest of us - especially if you fit into that other big category of "women". Why, wouldn't it just be better if they weren't around us any more? Wouldn't it make our lives, those of us in that other big category of "women", just so much easier and safer and nicer if we could put that category of "men" to one side, to do whatever it is they are compelled to do without getting in our way. Wouldn't that be lovely. If only it were possible.

Fear not, beleaguered sufferer of the patriarchy: feminist speculative fiction has got your back. As long as you are from the category of "women". And were recognised as such when you were born.

The idea of escaping from patriarchy by getting out from under the direct power and institutions of men is hardly a new one. Women have long been exploring the impact of male power on women's autonomy and well-

FEMINIST FUTURES:

being, and speculating on how separation from men (to varying degrees) might improve women's lives. Feminist separatism (both heterosexual - i.e. celibate - and lesbian) was a significant strand of "second-wave" feminist thought in the 1960s and 1970s. As you'd expect, this idea has also been explored in fiction, as in the myth of the Amazons, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland -- a travel memoir of a land where men don't exist -- both of which consider what all-women societies might look like, albeit from very different perspectives. In 20th century science fiction, the "single-gender-planet" trope has become well established, from the practical all-female futures of "When it Changed" and "Houston, Houston, Do You Read", to the magical pacifists of A Door Into Ocean, to the alien sexual biology of Ursula Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness. There's even the occasional all-male world, like Lois McMaster Bujold's Athos in Ethan of Athos. All of these stories involve individuals of another gender visiting (or in the case of Ethan of Athos, being visited by) the single sex society, exploring the clashes in expectations and culture that these provide. All come down on the side of integration being undesirable for the society, whose unique characteristics and culture would not survive the introduction of multiple sexes and the return of gender roles that would inevitably result.

This point is most firmly made in Joanna Russ' "When it Changed": the story that introduces the world of Whileaway revisited in The Female Man. The women of Whileaway never intended to create an all-female world, but disease early in their colonial project led to the death of all the men, and they've been doing fairly well on a hostile world nevertheless: sure, they need to do more farming than they'd like, but everyone is getting by. Generations later, when men arrive once again from space, they basically feel like a foreign species, and a community who have grown up without the dreaded mansplain are suddenly treated to the full force of male pity when it's discovered they have been living "alone" for so long. Unlike Herland, "Houston, Houston, Do You Read", and even the Left Hand of Darkness, Russ gives voice not to the outsiders but to the women they have "discovered", who are unimpressed and immediately aware that their rediscovery represents an end to freedom and self-determination, with their lived experience on Whileaway now subject to questioning and disbelief from male authority. The message here is that once the men arrive, so too do the dynamics of patriarchy; there is no way for women, even those brought up entirely outside of our gender norms, to combat the dismissal and subjugation men subject them to.

Where single-sex planets usually posit totally homogeneous societies, there are also plenty of stories The Wanderground, in which groups of "hill women" have developed a set of psychic, environmentally linked powers which allow them to talk to plants and animals, telepathically share thoughts and feelings and care from each other across long distances, control their own bodies and reproduction, have magical experience of one-ness with the moon, and prevent all male power and technology from working outside their cities.

Which assumes that men and women might live alongside each other and yet develop entirely separate communities. Like single-sex planets, these societies basically run the gamut from saccharine magical utopias to complete dystopian disasters, although from the example I've read, there's often more ambiguity even in societies which we read as basically working fine. On one extreme is Sally Miller Gearhart's

(Full disclosure: I attempted to reread the Wanderground - one of the first feminist SFF texts I ever encountered -- for this essay, and completely bounced off. Perhaps it's the Hill Women's casual killing of a group of "gentle" men (men who reject patriarchy, which as in several of these texts is equated with homosexuality) right at the start of the book, or the lack of personality among any of the perfect, selfless, emotionally open characters in the first 20% of the text. I can't take seriously the idea that women released from the patriarchy will also be released from all their personality faults and interpersonal conflicts, and that's the world Gearhart seems to give her characters with all their empathic powers and expanded self-awareness.)

Interestingly, I expected to see the nature vs. technology division of the Wanderground replicated across other texts, reflecting the ecofeminist movement that seeks to link male power to culture and technology and women to the natural world. On taking stock, however, I've read more books where women explicitly use control over technology to maintain power and separation from men, with men living in a more "natural" state of conflict that may either be entirely of their own choosing, or controlled through society. Ursula Le Guin's novelette "The Matter of Seggri" tackles, in the form of a series of anthropological texts, the development of a world in the Hainish universe called Seggri, where ancient genetic tampering has skewed the gender ratio to be less than 10% male. Like most of the "single sex planet" stories explored above, the narrative plays out from various outsider perspectives, and Le Guin juxtaposes the external expectations that "normal gendered" societies place on

Seggri. Women on the planet control almost all space and wealth and the few men are sent to "Castles", where they compete in sports against other castles and go out to service women in the town "fuckeries", set up for reproductive purposes only. Because of the gender skew, Le Guin never explores male power as an explicit threat to the women of Seggri, instead focusing more on how the system has affected the life choices and self-determination of both men themselves and the women who grow up as their sisters, mothers, and occasionally lovers.

Likewise, Sheri M. Tepper's The Gate to Women's Country allows women, and a select number of men, to live in relative technological comfort and to control the means of production, while the rest of the men are inducted into a warlike parallel society which most of them choose not to leave even when given the opportunity. And The Shore of Women, by Pamela Sargent, takes this one step further still: women live in high tech cities, completely separate from men except for the early years of looking after boy children, while men in the wilderness are allowed to live as hunter gatherers only, forming bands and worshipping goddesses controlled by the women. These "goddesses" actually turn out to be pornographic images in high tech "shrines" controlled by women, which allow them to occasionally bring men in and collect semen for artificial insemination while maintaining total societal separation. When two women -- a mother and a daughter -- are exiled from the city over an attempted murder, the mother is quickly killed but the daughter survives by revealing herself to a young man. The two eventually fall in love and attempt to find a place where they can survive without being killed either by other men or by the women who, it turns out, are willing to destroy any signs of technological progress (e.g. agriculture or settlements) that the men try to build for themselves.

These two texts, taken with Suzy McKee Charnas' Holdfast Chronicles (which I'll discuss more below) represent significantly more ambiguous or dystopian societies; The Shore of Women in particular is quite clear that women in control of military technology are capable of exactly the same kinds of destruction as men. Unfortunately, this isn't the only Sergeant book I've read where she sets up a mildly dystopian separatist society and sets it against the ~power of heterosexual love~ (the other is Venus of Dreams), and I can't help but feel we aren't at a point in our societal acceptance of queerness where this is a sympathetic "what-if". But despite the problematic elements in The Shore of Women, and especially The Gate to Women's Country, both do present their separatist societies with a level of nuance that's more in-keeping with what the speculative elements deserve.

Despite the existence of feminist separatist spaces (both heterosexual and lesbian) on the fringes of society, fiction which wants to address large-scale cultural or biological separation of the sexes needs to have a science fictional element, for the obvious reason that science has not yet developed to the point where humans can live in reproductively viable, "single sex" spaces. What this means is that many of these works effectively evolve around two speculative axes: first, the kind of technology or circumstance that enforces the separation of sexes, and how this is reproduced to allow for a relatively stable culture to be established; and second, how societies have evolved differently given this separation. Depending on the cocktail developed here, a work may posit a more or less utopian feminist future stemming from its societal set-up, and as we've seen from this limited sample, these really do run the gamut from ecofeminist wonderlands to "human business as usual" and past that to outright dystopia.

And, here's the thing a feminist separatist future, in which a cis-woman-only society can be developed and maintained and curated so these cis women can feel the full range of human connection and love, is a eugenicist future, and I believe it is deeply problematic to analyse eugencist futures along utopian lines. It's no accident that separatist feminism in the political sphere is usually identified with radical feminism, a phrase one doesn't often hear these days without "trans-exclusionary" before it. Some of these stories are very explicit about their eugenics angle, particularly when it relates to genetic "improvement" of men. The Gate to Women's Country is a prime example of this, in which the separatist project revolves around a secret scheme to breed genetically "better" (less violent, more cooperative, homosexual) men -- though it's not a revelation which the narrative takes lightly, or presents without controversy. What's more widespread is the assumption that we can simply erase the existence of people outside the conflated sex-and-gender binary -- trans, non-binary and intersex people -- and still have a valuable thought experiment on gender dynamics and patriarchy. If there are no intersex or trans people in The Gate to Women's Country, or The Wanderground, or A Door Into Ocean, we must assume they have been engineered out, and to be blunt, that's not fucking good enough for books aiming to present more utopian alternatives to patriarchy. And while I'd welcome an introduction to other examples (the comments are open!), the only non-cis gender identity I can

identify from the texts I've discussed above (leaving aside the Left Hand of Darkness) is Andy Kay in "Houston, Houston, Do You Read", whose masculinity is a product of non-consensual genetic engineering, not a reflection of their own felt gender identity.

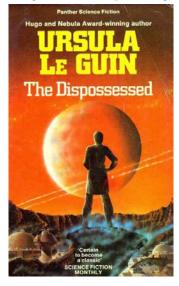
Ultimately, I find feminist separatism, with its compulsory cisnormativity, far more convincing as a setup for exploring restrictive, dystopian societies - especially when genetic engineering and reproductive technology come into play - than for dreaming up the end to patriarchy. I think this is what makes the Holdfast Chronicles one of the most compelling entries in this sub-genre, despite the almost cartoonishly misogynist society that it spends much of its time in. The first volume, Walk to the End of the World, spends most of its time in a post-apocalyptic society where men have instigated a brutal system of age-based heirarchy amongst themselves and reduced women to sub-human chattel called "fems". Through the eyes of one fem, Alldera, we eventually escape beyond this society, where literally grow up in pits and are forced to subsist on their own breast milk, and the sequel Motherlines introduces us to the women-only plains society of the Riding Women. Charnas resists the urge to set up the Riding Women as a panacea to the ills of the Holdfast, presenting their society as nuanced and not shying away from the taboo horror of their parthenogenic reproductive abilities (they were genetically engineered to reproduce by having sex with horses, because apparently that's what pre-apocalypse scientists spent their time on in Charnas' world), and the series is richer for this complexity. To take a much more recent example, Kameron Hurley's all-female The Stars Are Legion justifies its single-gender "planets" by making all technology biological and dependent on human uteri for its perpetuation. The resulting horror of having characters spontaneously conceive and give birth to spaceship parts is visceral and compelling, and Hurley has characters react in a wide range of ways to their own biology, which goes some way to addressing the lack of gender or sexual diversity in a society where there is only one pronoun.

Where does this leave us today? From a speculative standpoint, there's a huge amount to explore in the way our societies (be they worlds of the far future, or in parallel to ours, or somewhere else entirely) conceptualise gender and the relationships and hierarchies it creates. There is still a great deal to be explored in worlds that limit or delineate the space for certain identities, like the all female-pronouned empire of Radchaai in Ann Leckie's Ancillaryverse, whose gender identities are not analogous to anything we have on earth but whose assumptions about civilisation mean alternatives exist only on the non-assimilated margins. Likewise, I would like to see more worlds like Juliet Kemp's A Glimmer of Silver, which creates a single gender world by centring use of a non-binary pronoun and making this worldbuilding peripheral to the actual story being told. Ultimately, I don't think that feminist separatism has ever been an adequate tool to conceptualise the end of patriarchy and the utopias that might result: its assumptions rely too much on essentialism, binary identities, and on a problematistation of masculinity and men that only femininity can solve. Where stories are able to acknowledge and address their own problematic elements, however, it's a subgenre that is still worth diving into, despite its faults.

FEMINIST FUTURES:

THE CYCLE OF COMING HOME PHOEBE WAGNER

Dear readers, originally, I was planning a long form



eco-feminist essay for Feminist Futures, but after the IPCC report came out, I felt a new motivation to talk about a culture shift and how Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed responds from the past.

In 2018, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) produced a new report with an ultimatum nearly beyond comprehension let alone action: by 2030, a forty to fifty percent reduction in global emissions. If global emissions continue to rise, as they currently are, the report also describes what overshooting a 1.5 degree Celsius change means for the humans and nonhumans ("Summary for Policymakers" 6). Of course, many folks beyond scientists have imagined where a capitalist consumerist culture would ultimately lead, such as Kim Stanley Robinson, Octavia Butler, N. K. Jemisin, Jeff Vandermeer, Rebecca Roanhorse and on. The speculative genre (comprised of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and numerous sub-genres) has always imagined where humanity might end up-whether on Mars or in Area X. While inspiring, these writers do not always provide practical solutions to modern issues such as the climate crisis. Rather, their work tolls a warning. At this point, humanity is beyond warning, but as US society approaches what one might describe as a dystopia, speculative fiction can provide a map to a new future, if humanity chooses to follow the trails left by iconic characters, such as Ursula K. Le Guin's anarchist-physicists Shevek. In The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia (1974),

Ursula K. Le Guin describes the future foretold by the IPCC's report. If humanity can acknowledge the battle lost, perhaps there's another path—anarchy. Rooted in environmental thinking from Edward Abbey to Winona LaDuke, environmentalism has always understood that humanity belongs to a greater system than government. If one accepts the coming future, The Dispossessed becomes a literary tool, a map, and a warning: Here's how to create anarchy and here's how to keep creating it. This paper will argue for a new environmental anarchy described by Le Guin's novel, a theory of cyclical anarchy which encompasses human and nonhuman.

Ultimately, The Dispossessed is about voyage-going out and returning home. The alternating chapter structure follows Shevek as he grows up on the anarchist planet Anarres and as he leaves Anarres to study physics on the lush, capitalist planet, Urras. The book unites at the end as the final chapters feature Shevek preparing to leave Anarres for Urras while the older counterpart Shevek leaves Urras to return to Anarres. More episodic than plot driven, the novel traces Shevek's developing life and shifting views on anarchy, thus adding the ambiguity to Le Guin's utopia. While The Dispossessed has been explored for its circularity—particularly by Darko Suvin—it is often tied to the physics of the novel rather than anarchy. In two moments, the novel breaks the circularity through the introduction of minor characters-a woman from Earth (the Terran Ambassador) and a Hainish character who follows Shevek home to Anarres. While anomalies, their presence at the end of the book suggests their importance. Indeed, the Terran ambassador Keng fulfills the dictum of voyage and return by allowing the reader who has voyaged to these planets to "return" home to earth. When Shevek calls Urras in all its wealth a hell, Keng describes the current state of Earth:

"My world, my Earth, is a ruin. A planet spoiled by the human species. We multiplied and gobbled and fought until there was nothing left, and then we died. We controlled neither appetite nor violence; we did not adapt. We destroyed ourselves. But we destroyed the world first. There are no forests left on my Earth. The air is grey, the sky is grey, it is always hot. It is habitable, it is still habitable, but not as [Urras] is. This is a living world, a harmony. Mine is a discord. You Odonians chose a desert; we Terrans made a desert." (Le Guin 347-348)

Uncontrollable appetite, war, grey skies, the heat, desertification—each element of Keng's description is already happening and now nearly unstoppable unless the capitalist powers have a change of heart in the next twelve years. As Keng says, the US multiplies and gobbles without true restriction. Today, humanity lives in one hell, as described by Shevek, while heading for another hell described by Keng—a circle surrounding the reader. Yet, Le Guin offers the reader a way out by going home.

Yet, to go home in The Dispossessed means to return to a new place. A locality never remains static, nor does the returning person. For an anarchist, home goes beyond the definition of an owned structure or a place that belongs to a person. Rather, the relationship to home becomes an oscillation of going and coming-a cycle. In one of the earliest uses of river imagery, and only the second philosophical river image, Shevek connects his idea of voyage and return to rivers and the physics theories governing the novel: "You shall not go down twice to the same river, nor can you go home again. [...] You can go home again, the General Temporal Theory asserts, so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been" (Le Guin 55). The idea of home and the ever-cycling river become connected by their lack of sameness. Like Shevek's physics theories, this idea of not remaining the same can be invisible. A river and a home may seem familiar or unchanged but transformation exists, even if beyond human sight. Attempting to remain static pushes against the reality of rivers.

This definition of voyage-return as home connects to the novel's anarchist theories through Odo, the anarchist thinker and revolutionary who founded the Anarresti way of life. When Shevek is taken sightseeing on the capitalist planet Urras, where all the Anarresti emigrated from, he visits Odo's grave. While one might expect a revolutionary thinker jailed for her writings might have something equally revolutionary written on her gravestone, Odo's marker simply states: "To be whole is to be part; true voyage is return" (Le Guin 84). This sentiment is the only piece of Odo's writing the reader experiences without the lens of conversation or interior monologue. In this moment, the reader can connect with Odo's work on her terms. In the following chapter, written from young Shevek's point of view, he realizes Odo never fulfilled the ultimate voyage-return. She never reached Anarres: "[S]he had lived, and died, and was buried [...] among people speaking unknown languages, on another world. Odo was an alien: an exile" (Le Guin 101). Because no other Anarresti has left the planet since they emigrated, Shevek's journey becomes a turn of the cycle started by Odo, who started the voyage, but ultimately, Shevek brings the return. This cosmic cycle at the novel's

heart becomes paramount to the anarchic thought. Even though the Anarrestis took the desert moon as an anarchist experiment, their belief in the individual's right and will to act had become meaningless because they did not want Shevek to return to Urras. It caused anarchy to the Anarresti way of life, to their system, thus starting another cycle.

If The Dispossessed can become a lens for transforming the impact of the climate crisis across the US, then voyage-return becomes central to developing a cyclical anarchy. The American Dream leaves little room for coming home. Indeed, when a millennial returns home, often that person is considered a failure. Of course, reasons abound for why one might not return—abuse, sexism, homophobia, racism-but home can be expanded to where a person feels at home or to a locality that becomes home. As the millennial generation struggles to stay in one place or stay in a single job, the idea of calling somewhere home seems alien. While not the first to call for homecoming, Wendell Berry connects the need for young people to return to their communities as a way of fighting the climate crisis. In The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings, Wendell Berry describes homecoming as vital to reconstructing sustainable community: "The primary vocation probably is the call to go home, to go where one's gifts and one's work can be offered to one's family and neighbors, to one's home place-to 'what is actually loved and known," (ch. 2). Like Le Guin in The Dispossessed, he links vocation and homecoming. From early in his life, Shevek is tasked by his mentor to complete his work in physics (Le Guin 58). Only, Shevek discovers, the Anarresti don't want his theory because of the change it would bring, so he must complete Odo's journey and go home, to the planet of his people. Much like the idea of home is not limited to possession, this cycle of return cannot be limited only to ideas of journey. If to be applied to the climate crisis, the cycle of return must include previous practices. Since the Industrial Revolution especially, humankind have been on a racing arc of technological development. While environmental thinkers argue over the legitimacy of a wholesale return to primitivism or developing new environmentally friendly tech (and every argument in between), a cyclical anarchy allows for such seasons of development but requires a return to previous practices. Like Shevek-whose physics theories create a piece of technology that can instantaneously communicate through faster than light travel, thus reconnecting the whole of the universe, including Anarres-technological development can become part of the cycle as long as it

returns home, granted, a home changed by such technology. Wendell Berry writes: "As soon as I know that you and the other predictors are securely stowed away in the future with your computers, computer models, statistics, and projections, fearing now the fearfulness yet to come, I light out for home, where everything I love is suffering a long-established, still-continuing damage right now" (ch. 2). While there are seasons of waiting, Wendell Berry and the IPCC claim it is a season of doing. As governmental systems fail to transform capitalist consumerism, perhaps a cycle of anarchy focused on the local, the home, could create a ripple of change.

In 1974, the need for change seemed distant in regard to the climate. Indeed, the bleak descriptions of the anarchist moon Anarres seemed too scarce, too dystopic. While there was chatter in the scientific community, the first World Climate Conference was a few years away in 1979. Yet, as the climate crisis continues to grow, rather than Le Guin's description of scarcity becoming a moot point, a large critique remains regarding the scarcity-based anarchy on Anarres. In "Embodied Anarchy in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed," Daniel P. Jaeckle sums up this repeated criticisms: "The fact that Le Guin bases life on Anarres upon a level of scarcity even greater than that existing on our planet today means that her vision of anarchy does not contemplate a world in which society no longer has to fear material want" (93). While one cannot assume Le Guin foretold the climate crisis, she joins ranks of other authors (often women) who wrote distinct visions of the future that seem much too near to actualization in the twenty-teens: notably Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood. Thus, Jaeckle's argument stumbles: A post-industrial world is coming, and the IPCC report suggests humanity will have many material wants. Le Guin's inclusion of Keng the Terran Ambassador and her description of Earth foreshadows a future that Anarres offers a possible solution for, but only if implemented early. Keng states: "'We forfeited our chance for Anarres centuries ago, before it ever came into being'" (Le Guin 349). To that end, Le Guin presents a transitory vision of the jump between Urras and Anarres and how it might occur. If the question of anarchy in a post-scarcity world is voided by agreeing Le Guin does not intended (nor believe) anarchy as a possibility for a material-rich world, then the novel becomes a proposition for what comes next when the rivers run dry.

At the novel's center, the wells do dry up and a famine sweeps the desert moon. While part of Le Guin's utopic ambiguity questions if Anarresti society truly functions as an anarchic utopia, the other major ambiguous moment revolves around the famine. Death, threats of violence, making lists of who receives more rations-the famine tests the anarchic society. Even while living close with the land, taking only what is needed, the desert has its own cycle. Again, this section is criticized because it makes anarchy appear unattainable, as Jaekle points out: "To the extent that Le Guin envisions not merely deprivation but life-threatening scarcity, her view of Anarres may become increasingly remote as material prosperity spreads" (93). Yet, material prosperity represents another cycle, one which can only return to scarcity. Indeed, materiality is part of the cycle, even on Anarres where Odoism attempts to minimize excess. When Shevek first goes to the university, he is given a single room rather than sharing a space (Le Guin 102). He also has the choice of desert at every meal, which is unusual in Anarresti society (Le Guin 102). Finally, two new characters have possessions: Sabul, the physics instructor who withholds certain books form the general public, and Desar, Shevek's neighbor and a hoarder (Le Guin 105, 155). While Sabul and Desar's materialism is not specifically linked to the famine a few years later, these experiences create a sense of oscillation and balancing. During the famine, the Anarresti acknowledge that the scarcity brought them back to the foundations of Odo's teachings. In the early stages of the famine, the atmosphere remained positive: "There was an undercurrent of joy [....] The old tag of 'solidarity' had come alive again. There is exhalation in finding that the bond is stronger, after all, than all that tries the bond" (Le Guin 247). The cycle of the land prompted the return to solidarity, and the famine prompts Shevek to reexamine his individual choices in regard to Odo's anarchy, concluding that Anarres has become too systematic and must be shaken up. After the famine, Shevek chooses to recreate anarchy on Anarres.

How does one choose such an existence, to join the cycle of anarchy? Le Guin's other noncyclical moment presents one option: intentionality, with an acknowledgement it will not be easy. In the final chapter, Shevek's homecoming to Anarres differs from his exit: he brings someone with him. Ketho is Hainish, the namesake of the Hainish cycle that, chronologically, starts with The Dispossessed. When Ketho informally requests to land with Shevek, he says: "'My race is very old [....] We have been civilized for a thousand millennia. We have histories of hundreds of those millennia. We have tried everything. Anarchism, with the rest. But I have not tried it. They say there is nothing new under any sun. But if each life is not new, each single life, then why are we born" (385)? Here forms the central argument for cyclical anarchy: each life is new, each river changed, each home unfamiliar, each anarchy recreated. Recorded history might declare anarchy a failure, but you have not tried it. The cycle must start somewhere.

The Dispossessed joins the cycle by opening a door for the reader to voyage home but returned changed by imagining a possible future, a home never visited on a desert moon. Cyclical anarchy is not a damnation or expectance of apocalypse. One of the joys of speculative literature is the ability to rewrite the future and tell a different narrative. A practical element of that separate narrative is returning home and investing in local communities. Such investment breaks a system that expects the next generation to leave, whether for jobs, education, or exploration. This voyage cannot be complete without the return: a call to making a sustainable home. While not obviously anarchic, it disrupts the US cultural system that privileges the voyage without return. If we can dispossess ourselves of horror, fear, and lies about the climate crisis then a future of solidarity through plenty and famine, a future of seasons and cycles, a future of (re)creation awaits.

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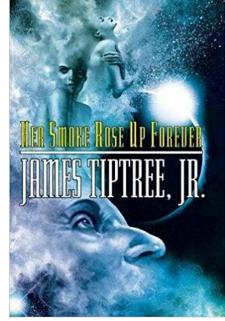
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y a door hanged by ited on a Dossier: Tiptree Ir, James. Her Smoke Rose Up Forev-

FOREVER



HER SMOKE ROSE UP

er [Tachyon, 2004]

Filetype: Book

Executive Summary: This collection of 18 short stories and novellas spans the publication career of Alice Bradley Sheldon, who wrote chiefly under the pseudonym "James Tiptree, Jr." until her identity (and gender) was revealed. She also wrote under the name Racoona Sheldon, a persona also represented by a pair of stories included here.

The stories included in this anthology span a wide range of sci-fi settings, from present day ("The Last Flight of Doctor Ain" and "The Women Men Don't See") to established outer space operations ("And I Have Come Upon this Place by Lost Ways" and "We Who Stole the Dream") to scientific or space exploration ("The Man Who Walked Home," "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," and "Houston, Houston Do You Read?"). There are a number of other stories that center the pointof-view in an "other" or "outsider" character, whether it's a human gripped by some form of madness or psychic distress ("Your Faces, O my Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light!" and "With Delicate Mad Hands") or some type of far-future, evolved human or sentient, decidedly

FEMINIST FUTURES:

non-human alien ("Love is the Plan, The Plan is Death" and "Slow Music"). The breadth of the collection is truly staggering.

One of the best-known works here is "The Screwfly Solution," which tells the story of a mysterious pathogen that is driving men all across Earth to commit femicide — murdering women without seeming to realize what they're doing. I will not spoil the reveal buried in the last line of the story, which gives some clarity to what's been taking place.

Another story that has come to take on something of a legendary status is "The Women Men Don't See." In this one, a male narrator — Don Fenton, a comfortably middle-class businessman who has nothing much to distinguish himself — tells the story of an ill-fated jungle tour in Mexico when the chartered plane he's on crashes on a sandbar in a storm. He and Ruth Parsons, one of the other passengers, set off to cross a marsh in order to find help, leaving Ruth's daughter and the pilot, Esteban, behind with the plane. Don struggles to perceive Ruth as anything but a collection of types — a "Mother Hen" with her daughter, one of the countless "Mrs. Parsons" working in accounting and billing et cetera throughout the D.C. bureaucratic corps - but as Ruth begins behaving very strangely and mysterious lights and sounds accost them in the marshes at night, Don begins to realize that Ruth might be preparing to go to extreme lengths to get away from the world of men...the kind of men who refuse to acknowledge in her any individuality or unique humanity.

One of the more heartbreaking stories in this collection of heart-breakers and gut-punchers is "Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light!" This is a parallel narrative of the authorities and family members of a girl who has escaped from a psychiatric hospital, and the story of the girl herself, who believes that she is a courier in a far-future after the nuclear wars, when all men have died off. The collision of her beautiful fantasy world and the ugly, brutal reality that she (thankfully) can't see but is nevertheless tightening its net around her is a painful journey to go on, but one that is beautifully rendered.

Feminist Future: There are a number of feminist futures (and presents) on display throughout Her Smoke Rose Up Forever. And, truth be told, most of them are pretty grim. These are stories where individual women and groups of women are victimized by men just as a matter of routine, where women are expected to perform scientific as well as sexual roles for their male crewmates during space exploration, and about women in societies where men have vanished, but (unlike Herland) hardly find themselves at peace in a worry-free utopia.

Hope for the Future: These are not hopeful futures. The worlds of James Tiptree, Jr. reflect in various far-flung settings a profound, nuanced, and lived-in understanding of the big and small ways in which women might be victimized, ignored, made invisible, or treated like property throughout most of the 20th century. Alice Sheldon took her lived experiences, which clearly filled her with a pervasive sense of righteous outrage, and transposed them into speculative frameworks that could illuminate her struggles and the struggles of women more broadly. By couching daily rituals of degradation or possessiveness in narrative and genre trappings, Sheldon was able to discuss and probe with deep empathy the effects of gender inequality that plagued her own era, and many of which sadly persist to this day, despite some progress. So in that way, thirty years after her death, her pessimism was at least partly justified.

Legacy: The work of Alice Sheldon inspired generations of female authors who felt that, for the first time, they were able to see themselves in science fiction. At a time when Arthur C. Clarke was writing stories where a hyper-intelligent ape might be a member of a space crew but a woman could not, Alice Sheldon was telling stories with female protagonists that could make women who experienced the same kinds of societal constraints that she did feel seen. That she had to do it in the guise of a man was instructive to the science fiction community at large, and Sheldon's contribution remains memorialized today in the James Tiptree, Jr. Literary Award and Tiptree Fellowships.

In Retrospect: First, a quick primer on "James Tiptree, Jr." For a wonderful audio profile, check out this story from KCRW's Unfictional in 2015. Tiptree appeared on the science fiction scene in the late 1960s with a string of short stories that immediately landed on lists for the top awards in the field, but he never arrived to pick up the awards. Never made personal appearances at all. But Tiptree kept up correspondences with a number of fans and young genre authors, particularly young women. Known to these correspondents as "Uncle Tip," Tiptree wrote overtly sexual, explicitly phallic stories in a muscular, brash style that often centered on female protagonists or on men confronted with a woman or group of women who explode against their plans, perceptions, or worldview, forever altering or imperiling them. In the landscape of late-1960s science fiction, this was a startling anomaly. Men simply didn't write women's stories in that field. Women's stories largely weren't told — unless women were included in roles like the ones in which Don Fenton saw Ruth Parsons...secretaries, mothers in the background of men's stories, assistants, etc.

So people began to wonder if maybe James Tiptree, Jr. wasn't secretly a woman. It's hard to imagine this detective work coming from anything but a place of ill will. Whether to discredit the stories or the author, the digging into who Tiptree *really* was ultimately forced "Uncle Tip" to come clean as Alice Bradley Sheldon, formerly of Army intelligence and the CIA. Alice Sheldon and Racoona Sheldon never received the acclaim James Tiptree, Jr. did, but the work remained astonishing, gripping, and bleak.

In reading Tiptree, I couldn't help but be reminded of Flannery O'Connor in that wherever the stories started or whichever direction they may start heading, they would always veer hard to death. Characters don't get happy endings, hope is inevitably extinguished just when it seemed likely to pay off, and those misgivings nagging at the back of characters' minds always turn out to be harbingers of a doom lurking just up ahead. The writing veers from aggressively straightforward to experimental, but the characters remain vibrant and engrossing. Even though plowing through this anthology winds up taking a toll, making the world look perhaps a little more gray, a little less trustworthy when you look up from the pages, these stories represent a towering body of work.

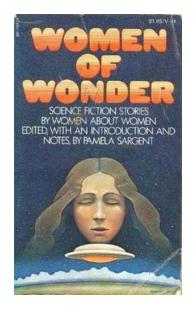
Analytics

For its time: 5/5

Read today: 5/5.

Wollstonecraft Meter: 10/10

FEMINIST FUTURES: WOMEN OF WONDER JOE SHERRY



Dossier: Sargent, Pamela (ed). Women of Wonder [Vintage, 1975]

Filetype: Book

Executive Summary: Pamela Sargent's Women of Wonder anthologies were the first anthologies of science fiction written solely by women. First published in 1975, that is a shocking fact - though one that even in retrospect shouldn't be terribly surprising.

The twelve stories and one poem of Women of Wonder are each written by women and are focused on female characters. The original publication of the stories are from 1948 to 1973. Most, though not quite all, are by authors who I at least recognized by name before reading this anthology, even if I had not read much (or any) of their work. The two I had not heard of were Sonya Dorman and Katherine MacLean, though I was only aware of Judith Merril as an editor and not a writer.

How familiar readers are with the twelve writers of Women of Wonder likely depends on how well and broadly read they are with the overall field of science fiction. For many, Vonda McIntyre may only be known as the writer of one Star Wars novel (The Crystal Star) and five Star Trek novels. Other readers will know McIntyre from her three Hugo Awards and one Nebula Award.

Pamela Sargent put together a powerful lineup of writers (and stories), some of which have become abso-

lute giants of the field. Anne McCaffrey. Ursula K. Le Guin. Joanna Russ. Marion Zimmer Bradley (more on her later).

Feminist Future: The feminism of this anthology might not be that the stories are inherently feminist in nature. Rather, every story is focused on a female lead and is written by a woman. That's the core of what makes Women of Wonder a feminist anthology. There simply wasn't an anthology like this before Pamela Sargent put together Women of Wonder.

Legacy: Pamela Sargent has put together an anthology including a Nebula Award winner, a Hugo Award finalist, and a Nebula Award finalist. Judith Merril's "That Only a Mother" is an oft anthologized story often considered one of the greatest science fiction stories of all time.

Women of Wonder still influences today. In 2014, Cristina Jurado published Spanish Women of Wonder, the first Spanish language speculative fiction anthology focused on female writers. It was translated into English in 2016.

The legacy of Women of Wonder is about breaking a barrier, making a statement, and delivering an excellent science fiction anthology that has stood the test of time as an important and vital anthology of feminist science fiction and science fiction written by women. It is a landmark anthology, but I do wonder what the lasting impact was. Sargent documented the existence and power of women in science fiction. To paraphrase Kameron Hurley, women have always written. They have always been a part of science fiction and they have always written some of the best stories of all time.

But as time passes, so many of those voices have been forgotten. We rightly remember Le Guin and McCaffrey and Russ, but are people still talking about Carol Emswiller and Kate Wilhelm? I hope so, but if they are, they're doing so in spaces that I don't see.

Women of Wonder is rightly a legendary science fiction anthology, but it might be time for someone to put together the new new women of wonder - under a different name but with the same goal of highlighting those women whose voices have been unjustly ignored over the last twenty to thirty years.

The success of Women of Wonder immediately led to the publication of More Women of Wonder in 1976 and The New Women of Wonder in 1978. Two subsequent volumes followed nearly twenty years later in 1996. **In Retrospect:** Most of the stories anthologized in Women of Wonder still hold up as stories that might be published today. Despite the well regarded status of "That Only a Mother" as an all time great, I don't think it would reasonably be published today. "That Only a Mother" is Merril's first published story and it lives on the gut punch of the twist at the end. It's an overall effective story, but also presents as a touch simplistic.

I don't think I've read a story quite like Vonda McIntyre's "Of Mist, Grass, and Sand" before. If I didn't know it was later expanded (with other stories) to be a part of the Hugo and Nebula Award winning novel Dreamsnake, I would still think this story felt more like a first chapter (or, rather, a second chapter). The specific story McIntyre told was complete, but there was clearly far more to this tale than was contained in the story.

"The Ship Who Sang" is one of the science fiction stories that is coded into my genre DNA. I've read the story, the novel it was expanded into, and have encountered the Brainships in Anne McCaffrey's Crystal Singer series. It's always been a part of my science fiction, as far as I'm concerned. "The Ship Who Sang" very much holds up today, but I do think there is a conversation to be had about how McCaffrey treats disability in this story and its implications. That conversation would require a much larger forum than this dossier review affords. "The Ship Who Sang" reads differently today, where children who are physically disabled are placed into metal containers and trained to be a living intelligence controlling a ship but knowing no other life. If the technology exists for that, what other technology exists and what is the implication of that technology? How does that play today?

Speaking of things that make me uncomfortable, "The Wind People" is the first story of Marion Zimemr Bradley's that I've read since her daughter came forward in 2014 that Bradley sexually abused her and other children, not to mention that Bradley had permitted (and perhaps facilitated) her husband's sexual abuse of children. If not for its inclusion in Women of Wonder, I likely never would have read this (or anything else by Bradley). It's uncomfortable (the story). There is a doctor (Helen), a mother, who decides to stay on an uninhabited planet with her newborn son because she knows that space travel would kill her boy. There is a moment midway through the story that Robin is sexually aroused and starts kissing on his mother. She rejects him and runs, but there's another very confusing moment at the very end of the story where Helen is either hallucinating or seeing the titular Wind People, one of whom may

or may not have fathered Robin - but her vision of that Wind Person turns into Robin and back again - causing Helen to wonder if there was some sort of incest involved. It's weird, confusing, and deeply unsettling on its face, but knowing more about Bradley it's almost impossible to not read more into that story. Bradley was a giant in the field of science fiction and fantasy, but knowledge of her deeply evil actions have put all of her accomplishments and work under a shadow. This may have been an important story at the time, but its legacy now is yet another work of hers touching on incest and sexual assault of a minor.

There's no effective way to transition off of that discussion of Marion Zimmer Bradley, so let's just briefly talk about Kate Wilhelm's "Baby, You Were Great". A finalist for the Nebula Award, this one was fairly depressing. The woman here is central, but the story is built using two men who have together created and broadcast a VR experience (of sorts, think television, but you can feel the real and honest emotions of the actors) of one woman's life. They selected her because her emotional responses come through so strongly that they manufacture more and more events to get bigger and stronger emotions. Naturally, when she suggests that she wants to get out, they blackmail her.

"Baby, You Were Great" feels eerily prescient in today's Hollywood following #MeToo and #TimesUp, but I think some of it is also just the same as it ever was. This is what an industry was built on.

The way we read and respond to the stories of Women of Wonder has changed over the years. We're less forgiving of otherwise powerful stories featuring sexual assault. Sexual assault is jarring and upsetting and if that's the point, the assault in "False Dawn" hits its mark. Jarring might just be what Chelsea Quinn Yarbro was aiming for, but that attack shows the age of the story. I'm not sure if it would be written in the same way today.

We see some of the ways well regarded stories might clunk around the edges, though they might have been groundbreaking fifty years ago.

As a whole, Women of Wonder remains an excellent anthology that holds up very well today. It reminds us of authors we may have forgotten about, haven't thought about in a while, or perhaps just never heard of. **Analytics**

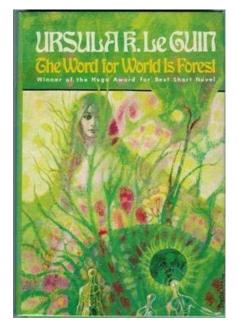
For its time: 5/5

Read today: 4/5.

Wollstonecraft Meter: 9/10

FEMINIST FUTURES: THE WORD FOR WORLD IS FOREST

PAUL WEIMER



Dossier: Le Guin, Ursula K. The Word for World is Forest [Again Dangerous Visions, 1972; Berkley / Putnam, 1976]

Filetype: Book

Executive Summary: The Word for World is Forest's story revolves around the revolt of the native population of an Earth colony, New Tahiti. New Tahiti is even more of a water world than Earth, landmasses on the world is restricted to islands and a sub continental sized landmass. The title of the novella reflects the fact that all of these islands, save the island that men have deforested and destroyed, have a forest ecology. In the Hainish verse of Le Guin, humans are not native even to Earth, and their progenitors, the Hain, seeded many worlds, including New Tahiti, with what we would call Terran like plants and animals, although evolution over the last couple of million years since that seeding has had its way on individual worlds. Thus, there are plants and animals which are close and familiar to human norms and then there are beings like the native Athsheans, who are hominids like humans, but are short, only a meter tall, and are green furred.

Since Earth is an ecological wasteland, the primary function of the New Tahiti colony is as a logging colo-

ny to ship valuable wood back to Earth. Humans from Earth are rapidly destroying the native forest in their logging efforts, and not so incidentally, the health of the entire ecosphere. The future of the natives, even as slaves to the humans, is in serious doubt. The Athsheans are not technologically advanced, having only reached the iron age, and so they were easily cowed by firearms and high technology. They are used as indentured servants but are regarded as being lazy even in that.

The Athsheans, however, finally revolt successfully against their colonial masters in an extremely bloody uprising that kills many of the humans, including all of the women. They then defang the humans of most of their superior weaponry and restrict them to a small area until the next interstellar ship can arrive and remove the survivors.

Feminist Future: As you can see, the feminist themes may be overshadowed by a first reading of the novella, and I missed them entirely when I first read the story. On a recent re-read however, I began to see how Le Guin explores it from each of the points of view we get.

For Davidson, we get a full thrusted 1950's style of male protagonist striding across the page, with all the casual violence and misogyny that SF protagonists of that age are known for. He treats women dismissively, casually inflicts violence and suffering on the natives, has abhorrent views on men not as infected with toxic masculinity as himself, and a complete lack of sense of self awareness about any of this. Le Guin takes what would be the heroic led in many of the books she grew up with and shows the very questionable underpinnings of the psychology and nature of such a hero.

For Lyubov, the scientist, we see a more nuanced view of women and their potential role in the colony, in society. He is shown in his own chapters as a typical man of the colony, even if Davidson mentally derides him in his mind as "effeminate", further showing the slant and bias of Davidson's point of view. Like any of the male colonists, he is very happy that there has been a new colony ship full of women, enjoys their company sexually but laments they are not entirely mature and forthright. He is the only human to really start to understand the Athshean pattern of governance and wishes, too late, that the colony ships had brought "a couple of grannies along" to better understand Athshean society.

Finally, there is our Athshean protagonist, Selver. It is from his semi-omniscient point of view that we get the major worldbuilding of the novel as regards to how the Athesheans see themselves, and how their societies actually work. Davidson and even Lyubov, for his sympathies for the native inhabitants, simply doesn't see or know about. We find that the Athsheans, at least as far as the "Forty Lands", it is women who run the cities and towns, men who go on trading and exploring journeys, Men have power and authority within the Men's Lodges, but in the end, Selver is only listened to by women like Ebor Dendep because of his ability to dream, because he is taken to be a god.

The ultimate fact of the inciting of the events of the novella, as revealed in the text, shows what Le Guin is doing here. The Athsheans are enslaved. Their forests are being cut down. They are physically abused by the Humans. There are intimations by Davidson and some of his like minded Humans that the Athsheans should simply be wiped out entirely,.It is ultimately, none of that that is the inciting incident that causes the Athsheans to rise up against the humans and reclaim their world. It is the fact that Selver's wife was sexually assaulted by Davidson, and subsequently died, that caused Selver to start his result, that made his revolt happen. In the end, it is violence against women that was the bridge too far.

This further shows that among other things, the novella is criticizing those earlier works that a character like Davidson would have been the hero in. Instead of a world where men are men and women be submissive to them, and reinforcing that toxic cultural norm, in the novella, Le Guin shows us that sort of world--and then shows us just how those sorts of assumptions look from the outside, from a society that does things very differently.

Hope for the Future: The Word for World is Forest is ultimately a feminist critique of older styles of science fiction. It provides a way to show a science fictional future that ultimately breaks away from the harmful stereotypes and limited values of those earlier novels, and so doing proves the hope and idea that when Humanity heads to the stars, it will be with the chance of becoming better than we were.

Legacy: The novella's polemic, strong, unyielding tone meant that it had an immediate impact on readers, especially since it was in the high profile Again, Dangerous Visions anthology edited by Harlan Ellison. It deservedly was nominated for and won a Hugo award. It's anti-colonial and ecological themes were likely the greater focus of readers at the time, given the Vietnam War, and the realization and maturation of the work into recognition for its gender and feminist ideals is something that has become a function of seeing it placed within the Hainverse.

In Retrospect: Is the novella as great or as groundbreaking as The Left Hand of Darkness or The Dispossessed? Perhaps not. Is it an important landmark of the Hainish cycle of stories and novels, a part of her exploration of gender, feminism and sexuality? Absolutely. In the midst of its more explored and obvious themes, Le Guin, even in the straitjacket of what is arguably a very polemic text about ecological devastation and destruction, finds room to also explore feminist themes and ideas that are a running theme of her work in general.

Analytics

For its time: 4/5

Read today: 4/5

Wollstonecraft Meter: 8/10

SPOTLIGHT ON HORROR

FRANKENSTEIN AT 200: AN OUTSIDER'S LOVE SONG

VANCE K



We never forget our first loves, yeah?

Sometime in the mid-to-late-1980s, KTXH Channel 20 — the local UHF channel in Houston, Texas showed 1931's Frankenstein and Dracula. I could not yet have been ten years old, and I don't know why I wanted to watch these two movies, how I'd heard about them, if I had seen them before, even — nothing like that. But I remember being excited to watch them, I remember finding them in the TV Chronilog (the Houston Chronicle's broadcast TV listings), and to this day, I remember sitting down on the floor of my parents' bedroom to watch them.

This was when colorization of black-and-white movies was an abomination a new thing, but these prints weren't colorized in that sense. They were tinted, as some prints had been upon initial release. I remember Frankenstein being green, and Dracula being primarily blue. I don't recall what my impressions of the films were beyond 1) I liked Frankenstein more, and 2) I now believed old movies to be super, super awesome. In addition to kicking off my lifelong fixation with classic films, Frankenstein has stayed with me as a key inspiration for much of what I have explored as a fan and created as a musician in the three decades since. But I didn't realize until Worldcon 76 published their schedule, featuring a panel on Frankenstein at 200, that 2018 was the bicentennial of Mary Shelley's novel's initial publication. That seemed as good an excuse as any to take a detailed look back at the themes underlying this work, which became a foundational text for both science fiction literature and horror filmmaking, and how those themes continue to resonate today.

Since Mary Shelley first published Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus anonymously in 1818, re-tellings and adaptations of her vision have abounded. From stage to screen, there are almost certainly too many versions to count. And I've seen a lot of them...all the Universal versions from the 1930s and 40s, Young Frankenstein, Kenneth Branagh's Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and God help me, Lady Frankenstein, Flesh for Frankenstein, and Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter.

But for our purposes, I'm going to focus on discussing Mary Shelley's novel and the two films James Whale made in 1931 and 1935, respectively, Frankenstein and The Bride of Frankenstein. I feel like the novel (specifically the original 1818 edition) and Whale's film adaptations are all excellent, and these incarnations capture the thing that has kept me so fascinated by the story since... well, literally since I can remember. If I can boil that attraction down to a single sentence, it is this:

The "monster" is not the monster.

I have long believed that the creature is more like me than not, that I have more in common with "the other" than I have in opposition, and that I have in my power the opportunity to cause great harm in another's life if I am unwilling to see that person as they truly are, beyond any outward appearance. These are lessons that have stuck with me, courtesy of Frankenstein, and throughout this series, I intend to look at these themes and others that still find resonance across two centuries.

* *

In many ways, I believe Shelley and Whale were both outsiders, and however intentional or not, I believe their work to be a celebration of the misunderstood and the outcast. Shelley was a woman living among the intelligentsia of the late Regency Era in England, the daughter of a trailblazing feminist writer (Mary Wollstonecraft) and a progressive thinker and writer critical of society's structures (William Godwin). James Whale was openly gay throughout his Hollywood career. I cannot speak to the pressures either Mary Shelley or James Whale felt, or their experiences with belonging to traditionally marginalized groups. But that belonging has been in my awareness of Frankenstein for at least the last 20 years, and I have felt for all that time that these two storytellers may have had good reason to identify more with the misunderstood, underestimated "monster" at the heart of this story than with the landed gentry and prosperous, "civilized" individuals like Victor Frankenstein.

In my reading of Shelley's novel and my interpretation of Whale's films, I find these to be subversive works released via mainstream outlets. In both, I don't think it's an accident that I empathize the most deeply with the "monster." But from the way that they told their stories, I believe that both of them crafted their presentations in a way that gave audiences cover for not getting it...allowing them to miss the point and still enjoy the work. Neither novel nor film paint the masses of humanity in a pleasant light, so it follows that the underlying message might have sailed right over the heads of most of their audience.

First, a quick look at the key differences between these works. Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus begins as an epistolary novel in which an adventurer and ship's captain named Robert Walton recounts to his sister his attempt to procure a ship and a crew in order to try to be the first to reach the North Pole. As they cross into the Arctic Circle, they find a man struggling in the water, his team of sled dogs having drowned, and they rescue him. This is Victor Frankenstein, and he begins to recount to Walton his tale, in which he has a happy childhood, is presumed from a very early age to be engaged to his cousin Elizabeth, and heads away from his hometown of Geneva to attend university. While there, he distinguishes himself in the fields of chemistry and natural philosophy, and embarks on a secret quest to reanimate dead tissue. He succeeds, creating a giant, human-like creature, but is so repulsed by the creature's ugliness upon its awakening that Frankenstein abandons it, and the creature disappears. The creature slips through the woods, slowly coming to understand life, and hides himself in a small outbuilding behind a household consisting of a brother and sister, and their gentle, blind father. From close observation of this family, the creature learns language, and then complex ideas on life and morality. (If you haven't read the book, more than likely you're not familiar with the creature becoming extremely eloquent.) Eventually, he tries to introduce himself to the family, having been their secret benefactor for many months, providing firewood and other aid. But upon seeing him, the brother attacks him

and drives him from the home. The creature then heads toward Geneva in search of Victor, with the demand that Victor make for him a mate — a female creature as rudely formed as he — that he might no longer be alone. Frankenstein refuses, ultimately, and the creature hastens the death of all whom Frankenstein loves, prompting Frankenstein to chase the creature to the ends of the Earth...or, at least the pole.

Between Frankenstein and Bride of Frankenstein, if taken as a single whole, the film adaptation is pretty faithful. Certain characters are pared away or consolidated, and there is the strange addition in Bride of Frankenstein of an eccentric character named Dr. Pretorius, who takes it upon himself to teach the creature language and help make the case to Frankenstein (inexplicably renamed "Henry Frankenstein" in the films) that "the monster demands a mate." There is no Captain Walton, no North Pole, and Frankenstein does finally consent to make a female creature. But the broad strokes are more or less the same.

In the book, Walton and everyone in Victor's life praise him to the stars as all that is noble and good in mankind. But his actions don't bear out this celestial approbation. Upon his creature waking, Victor is so revolted that he runs headlong into the street, bumps into his friend Henry, and reluctantly returns to his apartment and laboratory. Finding the creature gone, he feels relief, and then never seems to give it another moment's thought. "What happened to that giant creature I created from spare parts? Well, he's not here, so oh well, not my problem!" Later, his refusal to grant the creature's wish is rooted entirely in the creature's physical appearance. He listens to the creature's words and entreaties, decides to acquiesce to the request, and then literally looks at him and changes his mind. This happens repeatedly. And finally, on his deathbed in Walton's ship, Victor berates the crew members for not willingly dying in pursuit of impossible folly. He has learned nothing, it seems, and as he looks back at all that has happened, he finds himself blameless in his dealings with his own creation. He seems like kind of a dick. But as the novel's main character and principal narrator, Shelley allows her reader to invest in and empathize with Victor, should they want to. And the other characters in the book help make the case for him...but I don't think Mary Shelley believed he was blameless, or noble, or just.

Similarly, Boris Karloff's monster was sold as an absolute horror. Audiences were expected to recoil from the abomination, and hide their eyes behind their popcorn buckets. But James Whale didn't shoot him as an abomination. The lingering shot of Karloff reaching for the sun the first time he sees it, the playfulness and naivety that lead him to a deadly mistake with the young girl Maria, and the suffering the monster endures at the hands of a torch-waving Fritz all serve to humanize Frankenstein's creation, and these moments abound likewise in the second film. I don't think James Whale thought the creature, despite its billing, was a monster.

And nor do I. To me, in their own ways, these are works that signal to other outsiders that you may be different, but you are still worthy of understanding.

FRANKENSTEIN AT 200: Society be Damned Vance K



Maybe a decade ago, I worked on the script for a TV movie about Frankenstein's monster that never made it out of development, for a studio that will not be named. The exec we were working with, the director and I, got nervous about how much latitude they might have if they took on the project, being unsure of exactly what intellectual property Universal owns when it comes to Frankenstein. So they asked me to make it *not* Frankenstein's monster. Same story, but just...not Frankenstein's monster. Somebody else's monster, maybe?

This was a challenge. I don't know exactly what Universal owns and doesn't own either, but certainly Mary Shelley's book has long since entered the public domain and filmmakers have experimented widely with adapting and re-working the story. Take, for instance, the long but partial list of film and stage adaptations over at Wikipedia. But I was given the task of subbing out Victor Frankenstein and his creation for...anything different.

Here's the thing about that: Mary Shelley's vision has become so utterly foundational in our shared sense of the fantastic that I didn't see a path forward except by looking back further than 1818, the year Shelley published her novel. How could I conjure a mythology that didn't set an audience on the defensive immediately with thoughts of, "They're just ripping off Frankenstein"? So I went backward, and looked at the idea of a golem made from mud or clay, and either an alchemist or rabbi having created it. These legends predate Shelley by sometimes hundreds of years, but the themes of many of these stories run in close parallel to those Shelley explored in Frankenstein.

It was not a perfect solution, and the movie never got made. If I ever revisit that project, though, you can bet I'm switching dude back to Frankenstein's monster, because I didn't fall in love with science fiction and horror because of Kabbalistic stories of mud men. I fell in love with those genres because of Mary Shelley's creation.

I cannot know what Mary Shelley was thinking or feeling when she wrote Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus, but my aim here is not to present a scholarly, comparative lit exploration of her book, now celebrating its 200th birthday. But this seemed like a great opportunity to revisit the book, which I hadn't read in a decade and a half, and celebrate what about it still speaks to me today.

* * *

If we think about Frankenstein as a classic tragedy, then clearly Victor Frankenstein is the tragic hero, but what would be his tragic flaw? The facile answer is "attempting to play God," but I don't think the text fully supports that. It's not his playing God that dooms him and his family, it's his abdication of responsibility. After he forges his creature from unknown materials, he has lots of opportunities to head off the tragic outcome that ultimately befalls him, but he always chooses a different way. So it might be abdication, a refusal to take responsibility for his actions, or it could simply be idleness. As the privileged son of a wealthy syndic, Victor Frankenstein never knew want or need, and simply did things as his whim took him. He went to university just because. He made a creature from cast-off bits and gave it life just because. He went back home and married his cousin just because. I am perhaps being uncharitable, but the point is that nothing much seemed of great import to Victor except his current idea of how to pass the time. This is a criticism, I feel, that Mary Shelley would have had with all of those who, like Victor, made up the upper strata of society at the end of the 18th century. And, possibly, with her husband Percy Shelley, upon whom she probably based much of Victor's personality and circumstances.

I am reminded of F. Scott Fitzgerald's final assessment of Tom and Daisy Buchanan in The Great Gatsby, where narrator Nick Carraway says of them:

I couldn't forgive him or like him, but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

By the time 19-year-old Mary Shelley attended the fabled summer getaway on Lake Geneva with Percy Shelley and Lord Byron — in the bizarre, inexplicably hostile summer of 1816 that had many across the globe fearing the end of the world — in which she came up with the idea for Frankenstein, she had already given birth twice. Her and Percy's first child had died after being born premature, and after the birth, Percy had left Mary and run off with another woman for a brief affair. I have to wonder how much Percy Shelley's abdication of responsibility toward his and Mary's sick child informed Victor's abdication of responsibility toward his "offspring." I have to believe it did influence Mary's depiction of, if not Shelley, those situated like him. How could it not?

In my reading, I see the creature as a sympathetic figure, and an innocent. His crimes — and he racks up a pretty healthy string of murders — are the culmination of a long, brutal lesson taught him over and over again by the human beings he encounters. I'm ascribing my own feelings regarding the creature to Mary Shelley's design, and I fully realize that my interpretation may not match her intent. But there are a couple of events that take place during the creature's long sojourn in the outbuilding behind the De Lacey cabin that I find fascinating. The first is the story of how De Lacey (the blind old man) and his two children came to live in that desolate cabin, and the other is the related story of Safie, Felix De Lacey's fiancee, who arrives unexpectedly.

As I discussed in the previous post, in Shelley's original construction, the creature hides away for months in this outbuilding, and learns not only language by watching the De Lacey family, but also history and poetry, including Milton's Paradise Lost, from which the book's epigraph comes ("Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould Me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?"). The creature believes the De Laceys to be the most gentle and admirable of all people — and truth be told, they may well be, which makes what Felix De Lacey does later doubly horrifying — and his opinion is reinforced when the reader learns the story of Safie, Felix's fiancee, which also reveals why the De Laceys live in such dire material circumstances.

The De Laceys, late of wealthy Parisian society, were acquainted with a certain Turkish merchant who was arrested, it is implied, wrongly. Out of an abundance of character and virtue, the De Laceys conspire to release the Turk from prison and secret him to safety. This is admirable stuff (the Creature is listening)! The Turk is so grateful, he promises his daughter Safie to Felix for a bride (and they love each other, so this is all a win-win). But the duplicitous Turk is lying, and actually intends to take Safie away with him after the De Laceys spring him from the hoosegow. Again, the Creature is listening. Self-sacrifice is met with duplicity. But eventually, after the De Laceys effect the Turkish merchant's escape from prison and safe passage from Paris, and after Safie is denied her return to Felix...after the De Laceys are found out and banished from France to a remote hovel in Germany, after all that, Safie shows up to be with her true love, Felix. So ... true love wins? In the face of society? Maybe?

Here we leave the parameters of the De Lacey story and get into Safie's personal story. Here Mary Shelley does something that had to be uncommon in fiction from 1818, in that she gives a female character agency. Safie discovered her father's plans for her, and discourses at some length about the decision that she made not to return to her Turkish origins, which would have severely proscribed the type of life and agency she might possibly realize. It was hard for me, as a modern reader, to separate Safie's feelings about female agency from those of Mary Shelley. In Safie's story, we get possibly the clearest and most concise argument for women's equality to be found in the book. Though Safie's criticisms are couched in terms of religion ("the Arabs won't let women do... xyz..."), it's no stretch to see that the lives of European women in Shelley's time were almost as narrowly defined. If Mary Shelley stakes out a position on women's equality, in the tradition of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, in Frankenstein it is through the micro-drama of Safie. It may or may not be stretching things to say that the Creature, when presented with the idea of fully human women being treated as "lesser than," saw in the struggle for women's equality the passion of his own heart.

This leads us to the sad resolution of the Creature's time as a silent observer of the De Lacey home. He has closely watched a family that treats the elderly/women/ foreigners with dignity and respect. They are, no doubt, aberrant, as they might be in some circles today, but in the most admirable of ways. Yet, when he, with his monstrous appearance and proportion, presents himself to them, he is literally beaten, driven from the house, and the house is found so contaminated by his presence that the inhabitants never return.

So in the end, what is Mary Shelley saying about humankind? Nothing good, it would seem. Not only are those who are illegitimately lauded for their basic human competence (Victor Frankenstein) incapable of taking responsibility for their own foul-ups, but the most generous and magnanimous of people (the De Laceys) will violently reject those who are different from themselves. Regardless of circumstance, the status quo demands adherence. And people like the "Creature," or others who are similarly misunderstood, stand little chance of acceptance, regardless of the content of their character.

It is hard to argue with Mary Shelley, even today, that the comfortable, born-well-off individual can not simply do whatever he wants without consequence. Perhaps it is this enduring dynamic that makes the murderous Creature so relatable. Despite the characters in the book speaking in such hyperbolic praise of individuals who fundamentally reject taking responsibility for their own actions, there is, it seems, an implied subtext that resonates to this day — 200 years later — suggesting that those on the outside of this privilege, looking in, are forever playing a rigged game.

FRANKENSTEIN AT 200: WHAT MONSTROSITY LOOKS LIKE

VANCE K



One might have been forgiven, in 1966, for thinking, "Welp, that's the end of Frankenstein, right there." It was in that year, you see, that the world got Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter. In this, um, "movie," notorious outlaw Jesse James escapes down to Mexico, where the only doctor in town, and the inhabitant of the ancient castle in the village — you know, one of those great ancient, European-style castles that tiny Mexican villages are always known for - is Doctor Frankenstein's granddaughter. Not daughter, but that's the least of our worries. Jesse's traveling with his only surviving gang member, Hank, who's hurt. When Maria Frankenstein, the "doctor," sends Jesse out into the village to get medicine for Hank, she takes the opportunity to chop out Hank's brain, give him a new one, and turn him into a beefy kill-machine. Even when compared to its awful, awful companion film Billy the Kid Versus Dracula, produced by the same company in the same year, this movie is stunningly incompetent. Words simply fail.

If it were a piece of literature or a cultural icon any less durable than Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, it would have seemed like the gas tank was entirely empty at that point. The book was 150 years old, after all, and James Whale's iconic films were both over thirty years old, and had been followed by over a decade's worth of increasingly dubious sequels and spin-offs that saw Frankenstein's monster paired with several members of the Frankenstein family tree, the Wolfman a few times, Dracula, Abbott and Costello, and...at some point, who could even keep track? So when you've got fly-by-night, drive-in movie producers putting Frankenstein's heirs in the Old West, it would sure seem like the creative well was dry, and the world might have had its fill of Frankenstein movies.

And yet.

You may recall Harry Potter Daniel Radcliffe's recent turn in Victor Frankenstein. Or you might recall the stage play Frankenstein with Sherlock Holmes Benedict Cumberbatch and Johnny Lee Miller. Or, unfortunate soul, you may recall the film I, Frankenstein in which the creature gets caught up in the, um, ancient war between...*checks notes*...I guess gargoyles and demons? And there were in the 1990s Roger Corman's Frankenstein Unbound, which featured time travel, and Kenneth Branagh's Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, which featured Branagh and Academy Award-winning screen icon Robert DeNiro wrestling naked in some type of amniotic goo. The point is, if the world should one day tire of reincarnating Mary Shelley's creature, it will be a long, long time hence.

But Shelley's work has invited re-interpretation ever since its original publication 200 years ago — even by Shelley herself. The book first achieved prominence not upon its initial, anonymous publication, but upon its first adaptation to the stage, in 1823. The success of the stage play led to the publication of the second edition of the novel that same year, and the first time Mary Shelley was credited as the author. In 1831, Shelley herself radically altered the text, and published a new version of the book, which takes much of the blame for the events in the novel away from Victor Frankenstein and attributes it rather to fate. There is something primal in Shelley's story, something fundamental that has found continued resonance with the human spirit even through the seismic upheavals in culture, society, and technology that have taken place over the last two centuries.

Shelley's original version of the text carried this epigraph, taken from Milton's Paradise Lost:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay

To mould me Man, did I solicit thee

From darkness to promote me?

Guillermo del Toro has called Frankenstein the ultimate teenage novel, a book forever echoing familiar adolescent feelings like, "I didn't ask to be born," and "How can the people who gave me life not understand me at all?" That is an apt observation, and almost certainly contributes to the book's longevity. And it can't be ignored that Shelley wrote the novel when she was a teenager, herself. But baked into del Toro's observation is a perspective, and it is the Creature's. Del Toro's implicitly suggesting that the reader does and should identify with the Creature, and it is the "monster" who is the point-ofview character. I feel the same way, which is something I discussed in the first installment of this series.

But I also feel that the lessons of the novel, or the cautions and warnings baked into it, extend far beyond one's adolescence and are lessons we must continually re-examine and re-visit on a societal level, specifically because of the cultural and technological upheavals that have led from Shelley's youth to our present. We have accrued greater power over life and death than ever could have been imagined in even the most outlandish speculations of 1818. The casualties of World War I 100 years later could scarcely have been imagined, let alone the notion that organ transplants would one day become routine medical practice. The "horror" of Shelley's imaginings - pillaging corpses for their organs to put into another body - has now saved countless lives. And, unless I am consumed by flame and if I die with my driver's license on me, one day part of me will live on in someone else. Hopefully it's a good part...

As long as humankind is faced with the question of "Though we can do this thing, should we do this thing?" I believe Frankenstein will stay with us, constantly re-invented and re-imagined for our times and our contemporary struggles. And, sure, for crappy movies here and there that are just trying to get mileage from the name. But Mary Shelley seemed to believe that Victor Frankenstein was the guilty party, and his creation Frankenstein's first victim. That's how I read it, anyway, sitting here 200 years later. And that remains instructive. What are the ramifications of our decisions? Our technologies? Our innovations? What might the human cost be? What constitutes "acceptable losses" in the pursuit of knowledge?

But maybe none of this applies to you. I doubt it applies to me. I am neither a creator of technologies nor a wielder of great power. So the thing that I take away from Frankenstein, and the thing that maybe we all need to be reminded of more than anything else, is that those who are different from us are no less human, and we all, in fact, have an obligation to one another. This is not, I think, a lesson we will ever fully learn, and if we need Mary Shelley's Creature to remind us of this from time to time, then long may he live.

HORROR 101: VIOLENCE IN HORROR, PART ONE CHLOE



A lot of times when I mention being a horror fan or horror writer, people say something about the violence in horror: "I can't watch that stuff, it's too gory" or "why would you want to write something violent." Rarely do I want to go into pedantic scholar mode (except for my poor long-suffering students), so I usually just shrug. However, here in Horror 101, is exactly the place for me to get onto my horror scholar pedestal and say: good horror isn't about the gory, or shocking acts of physical violence being depicted. Instead, it's often about the true nature of violence which is the loss of agency. So in this column, I'll be talking about violence and agency in horror. Violence is a subject I plan to tackle from a few angles in terms of horror-while this is looking specifically at violence as loss of agency, later columns will address violence and women's bodies in horror and other issues about the use of violence in the genre.

When we think of horror, we might think of the visceral moments that have stayed with us: the opening murder in Scream, for example, or the shark in Jaws taking off someone's leg. Those moments stick with us because acts of physical violence cause such visceral emotional reactions: disgust, terror, an empathetic surge at the pain. However, beneath these physical moments of violence are the ones of the more subtle but insidious acts of violence.

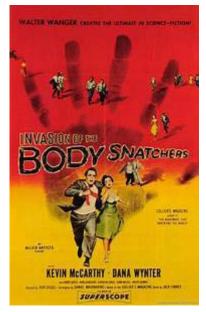
Violence as a loss of agency is the idea that any act that removes agency is a violent one. These can be individual acts, like if a woman is stalked and then needs to change her patterns of behavior in order to feel safe, or they can be systemic ones like the judicial system putting policies in place that adversely affect a specific group of people. This is not to say that this style of violence doesn't lead to physical violence, because it does. Get Out (WHICH SHOULD HAVE ALL THE AWARDS, JUST SAYING GOLDEN GLOBES, JUST SAYING) is a film that finds much of its horror and tension through exactly this type of horror and violence. I talked more in depth about Get Outand the rhetoric of violence and using genre as social action here, so I won'tgo into that as much now.

One facet that particularly interests me is how by often using female protagonists, horror allows us to view this type of violence in an amplified way (which is often what good horror should be doing—showing us some horror of everyday life and elevating to an extreme so that everyone can feel it). When Sidney in Scream has to follow arbitrary rules in order to stay safe, we see a loss of agency that all women have probably felt at some time in their lives (don't walk alone at night, don't tell someone where you live, don't smile at the wrong person). So when she takes back control, it becomes a cathartic release not only in the sense of the film but to any woman who has felt like they had no control over the things being done to them.

By using violence as loss of agency in horror, the audience can contemplate larger societal issues around them. Horror is about fear and how we try to survive in the face of it. But, it can also be asking how we confront the things that make us afraid and how we can try to overcome them. I hope to see more socially conscious horror films, following the success of Get Out (here also is my review), as I think it's a genre that can be more effective than most in making us feel those issues.

What do you think? Is this kind of violence important to discuss? What are your feelings about depictions of violence in horror? Tell us in the comments or tweet me @PintsNCupcakes.

HORROR 101: SURROUNDED BY OTHERS -- ANATOMY OF A POD PERSON CHLOE



As a child, two of my earliest film-related memories are watching the 1978 version of Invasion of the Body Snatchers and watching the John Carpenter version of The Thing. In both, what stuck with child me was the depiction of a monster who not only could be anyone, but also could be someone that you think you know so well: your crewmate, your friend, your lover. This early exposure to these two films led to a longtime obsession with pod people (which the Thing is not technically, but I'm extending my definition here to any monster who can appear in the exact visage of someone you know and trust). As a child, there was a visceral terror to the idea, because the world was one I trusted. As an adult, while I don't think pod people are likely, they still strike a certain fear because the concept at the heart of pod people's terror-making is very much real. In this edition of Horror 101, I'll be diving into the anatomy of a monster (a thing I'll do occasionally in this series).

The most famous example of Pod People in their truest definition comes from Invasion of the Body Snatchers, a novel by Jack Finney from 1954—which was made into a film in 1956. In the book, alien spores (essentially) fall on a Californian town. Once there, the spores make pods where duplicates of the townspeople form inside. The pod people retain the characteristics, mannerisms, and even memories of the people they are copying. However, they lack human emotion and empathy. The epidemic is at first misdiagnosed as a kind of Capgras Syndrome (a real disorder in which a person believes their loved ones have been replaced by imposters). Ultimately, the film becomes an examination of paranoia and distrust, as the characters who realize the truth try to warn people who refuse to listen. The film, despite being outdated, retains a frenetic energy to its paranoia. However, the story reaches higher peaks of excellence in two remakes.

1978's Invasion of the Body Snatchers, directed by Philip Kaufman, stars Donald Sutherland, and heightens both the paranoia and the distinct unsettling terror of the original. One early scene that stuck with me so vividly as a child that I still sometimes flash on it (and which shares a few parallels with what I still consider Ray Bradbury's most terrifying story, "The Crowd), wherein a crowd of onlookers stares at a body without showing any kind of emotion. The way to try to survive against the pod people involves stripping the emotion from one's self, so that you won't be detected-a disturbing uniformity through loss of empathy. The final scene of this film still remains one of the most effectively chilling of any film. One through line that both films retain is their loss of hope-how do we fight against that which surrounds us?

This question continues in 1993's Body Snatchers, directed by Abel Ferrara. The action of the plot is moved to a military base but retains the underlying premise of the book and two previous films. This, along with the 1978 version, is one of my favorite sci-fi (or horror) films and features a distinctly chilling performance by Meg Tilly. This version shifts its heroes primarily to teens and children-who are consistently disbelieved. An interesting twist that capitalizes on the way youth is often used as an excuse to not trust the word of children in the face of the horrific (a device horror uses often). The film answers the previous question I raised by asking another, voiced by one of the pod people: "Where you gonna go, where you gonna run, where you gonna hide? Nowhere... 'cause there's no one like you left." This points to one of the most effective aspects of pod people as monsters.

If monsters are often the way we depict "others," what then happens when the protagonists become the other? When pod people become the majority and they look just like your friends and family, who is the other in this situation and what does that even mean anymore? Pod people, in terms of monster theory, are fascinating because of the way they shift the dialogue from obvious monstrosity to a subtler depiction of both othering and what constitutes a monster. In a world where consistently loss of empathy towards others creates policies that enact violence (see my last Horror 101for a deeper look into violence as a loss of agency), isn't a person who looks just like your neighbor but without a guiding emotional core or empathy, the ultimate kind of horror? Or, maybe a better question is, shouldn't it be?

TIP OF THE HAT: THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE (NETFLIX)





Just before Halloween, Netflix released the limited series The Haunting of Hill House, based on the 1959 novel of the same name by Shirley Jackson. The book already inspired an iconic film adaptation in 1963, The Haunting, and for my money, The Haunting is as good as classic horror movies come. It also inspired The Legend of Hell House from 1973 by way of writer Richard Matheson's largely derivative source novel Hell House, and then a forgettable filmed remake with Liam Neeson in the 1990s.

And Shirley Jackson is a titan. Not only is her original book more than worthy on its own merits, but she also wrote one of my favorite novels, We Have Always Lived in the Castle, and left a legacy of short stories that belong on any one of multiple literary Mt. Rushmores. Everybody has to read "The Lottery" in high school, but the fact she has not remained a household name is a huge oversight. But...

I say all of that to say this: I really, really like Shirley Jackson, and was so worried the creative team behind this 10-episode limited series would swing and miss. I need *not* have worried. This show is a masterpiece. There are simply not enough good things I can say about it, and I regret I wasn't able to get a review together in time to be relevant. So instead, I simply tip my hat to a profound, intelligent, and moving work of art. That's also a real long horror movie.

A Masterpiece of Adaptation

Executive Producer and series director Mike Flanagan and his team of writers laid the foundation with a truly inspired adaptation. In Jackson's original, a paranormal researcher named Dr. Montague assembles a team of sensitives to stay in Hill House, reputed to be the most haunted house in the United States. Hill House was built by Hugh Crain, an eccentric millionaire, and various violent deaths descended on his family, centering on the house. Montague hopes to prove scientifically that the spirits, and therefore the paranormal at large, are real, and assembles his team with the tough, worldly Theodora, the shy, reserved Eleanor Vance, and Luke Sanderson, heir to the house. It soon becomes apparent that Eleanor has a strong connection to the house, or vice-versa, and seems to be in danger of losing touch with reality or succumbing to the house's ill will, depending on your read.

How best to modernize what has been called the greatest haunted house novel of them all? Turns out, you start with nobody knowing the house is haunted, and make Hugh and his wife Olivia house flippers with a big family. Let the original haunting and horror befall the Crain family and their little children, and then, as adults, force them to revisit the house after their own experiences have formed the basis of the house's reputation. From little things, like names — the way Eleanor Crain becomes Eleanor Vance, one of the Crain daughters being named Shirley — to big character stuff like giving Luke Sanderson's alcoholism to one of the grown Crain children, and plot moments that are either direct quotations from the book or subtle homages, I could simply go on and on and on about the decisions made to both honor the source material while fully owning a new telling with a strong vision.

There is a certain fatalism regarding human cruelty that runs through Jackson's work. That is largely absent in the adaptation. There is certainly a fatalism — bad things, real bad things, are going to befall these people, through no fault of their own — in that the train is coming and no one will be able to stop it. But this family, however estranged from one another, have a shared love for each other at the core of their various relationships, and this pull provides the adaptation with a profound emotional shape and resonance.

A Masterpiece of Design and Direction

Episode 6. Ye gods.

The whole season is beautifully directed, but Episode 6 has an utterly astonishing long-take in it that took my breath away on every level. From staging, to conflict writing, to set construction, to blocking, to dialogue and performance, to surprise and terror, there is simply no parallel that I'm aware of in film. I know about Welles, I know about Hitchcock, Altman, Cradle Will Rock, Birdman, and I'm telling you I've never seen anything like it.

I could, and have, gone on and on in fine detail (wake my wife up and ask her), but I'll leave it here. I hope Shirley Jackson would be proud. To steal a line from Ornette Coleman, beauty is a rare thing, and for this novel to succeed, and its film adaptation to succeed, and now this television adaptation to succeed on a bewildering scale...I am simply happy to be a fan that gets to experience it.



PERSPECTIVES: LET'S TALK MARVEL COMICS! THE G, MIKEY N, SPACEFARING KITTEN



After watching a string of unusually good MCU films (Black Panther, Thor: Ragnarok and Guardians 2), I got the urge to catch up on the Marvel comics I've missed since I stopped reading them regularly. Revisiting the Marvel comics universe has reminded me both of what I love about superhero comics and what I don't love. So naturally I invited our other resident comics fans, Mike and Spacefaring Kitten, to talk all things Marvel. - G

G - I just recently got Marvel Unlimited, which for the uninitiated is a subscription service that gives you access to some 20,000 titles from the Marvel back catalog--basically everything except the very newest titles. (Well, not everything...but a lot.) So, after an extended break, I've been dipping my feet back in the Marvel universe. Mainly I've been re-reading old titles and storylines that I enjoyed when they came out, but I'm also catching up with what's been going on since I stopped buying single-issue comics, sometime around 2012.

This got me thinking about what I like (and don't like) about superhero comics, and made me want to talk about it with other comics readers. So let me start by asking: who is your absolute favorite Marvel hero and why?

SK - X-Men (and various other X-Titles) have always

been my favorite Marvel stuff, but I guess the interactions between various team members have been more interesting for me than any one character. Magneto is quite fascinating whenever he is not portrayed as a simpleminded psycho villain. I'm into conflicted antiheroes, I suppose.

M - At the risk of being cliche, Captain America is my favorite Marvel hero. Ed Brubaker's run back in 2005 hooked me on the lore surrounding the villains like Red Skull, Dr. Faustus, and Arnim Zola to name a few. This set a rich backdrop that allowed me to experience Captain America with a depth I didn't have earlier in my comic book reading days. Brubaker also managed to make Captain America much more relatable by painting him more as a tragic figure. On the surface he is almost too perfect and clean cut, but underneath he has a real identity crisis. He has lost almost all of his friends and, as Brubaker's first arc is titled, is a man "out of time".

G - Magneto is my all-time favorite villain, to the extent that he *is* a villain, for precisely the reasons Spacefaring Kitten mentioned. You understand his motives, even sympathize with him. At no point do you consider him evil, but rather an idealist twisted by his experiences--first as a Jew during the Holocaust, and then as a mutant in a world that is fearful and hostile to mutants--into a political militant. That someone with such callous indifference to the loss of (human) life possesses such awesome power...that's what makes him terrifying. But at the same time, you know what made him that way. Plus he has his moments of lucidity, which further complicate things. In a sense, I guess, he's not a villain at all, but rather a fairly realistic take on what many superpowered heroes would actually be like if they possessed that kind of power.

I also agree on Cap. Unlike Magneto, he's an "ends don't justify the means" type of person. But the best Cap runs--like Brubaker's--portray a struggle to reconcile his pristine ideals with the dirty reality of life as it actually is. So while he's not an antihero by any stretch, there is plenty of conflict there. Plus his rogues gallery is one of the best.

My absolute favorite Marvel hero, though, is Silver Surfer. Why? A few reasons. First, I've always loved Marvel's cosmic "world," from Galactus and the Celestials to the alien species like the Kree and Skrulls. It's vivid and colorful and more than a touch campy, and a cosmic surfer fits that aesthetic perfectly. Second, the Silver Surfer is basically wracked with guilt over all the deaths he's (at least partially) responsible for. I guess you could say he's the anti-Magneto of the Marvel Universe. What I mean is, whereas Magneto starts as a victim only to become a perpetrator of atrocity, Silver Surfer begins as a perpetrator of atrocity and then evolves into a protector of sorts. The best Surfer runs are both joyful and melancholic.

How about small-scale characters? You know, the kind who rarely merit their own books but are great whenever they show up?

M - This question drove me completely to the villain side of things and the always fascinating M.O.D.O.K. The Mobile Organism Designed Only for Killing always brings a smile to my face and I love that, despite being such an odd bird, he is incredibly intelligent.

SK - There are so many, and I think that the sense of there being a vast, populated universe outside the boundaries of any one comic is an important part of the allure of Marvel creations. Uatu The Watcher is an intriguing character, and I also like to see other groups of superpowered characters who mostly stay on the background, like Morlocks or Starjammers.

My viewpoint is a little skewed because only a handful of Marvel comics were translated and published in the country I live in, and those were the only ones I had access to while growing up. Inhumans or X-Force were not published here, so they seemed more like background characters to me even though in reality they had their own titles and adventures. Inhumans are very cool, as weird aliens always are.

G - Inhumans are sort of like Silver Surfer, in the sense that they'll get their books here and there but not consistently. Agree they're awesome. I love the concept of Black Bolt being one of the most powerful beings in the universe, but he can't speak for fear of destroying everything. I love the notion of there being a price to super powers.

Staying on the cosmic side of things, I'm a big fan of Ronan the Accuser, particularly when he's portrayed as an antihero rather than villain. For me he's the highlight of Annihilation--this force of nature determined to clear his name at all costs.

Back on earth, I've always been partial to Moon Knight. The character is pretty ridiculous--an ex-mercenary Batman clone who wears silver (which would be quite visible at night), got his powers from an obscure Egyptian god and has multiple personality disorder. My favorite Moon Knight run is the Chuck Dixon reboot (1989), which got rid of the Steven Grant and Jake Lockley aliases and dug deeper into Marc Spector's shady mercenary background. I'm a little scared to go back and re-read it, because I have such fond memories of the series; alas, I suspect it won't live up to those memories.

One more I'll mention is Mystique. She's another villain who's not a straightforward villain. She's always playing some kind of double game, and her motives are frequently opaque. She's 100 years old, Nightcrawler mother and Rogue's adoptive mother. I've always found her fascinating.

Okay, let's shift gears to our favorite and least favorite Marvel storylines. My favorite classic stories are the Galactus Trilogy (even though I don't generally care for the Fantastic Four), the Kree-Skrull War, Dark Phoenix Saga (plus Days of Future Past) and the Second Kree-Skrull War/Infinity Gauntlet. For the more recent stuff, I really liked House of M--a series with real conceptual heft and a strong emotional core. I love Annihilation for rebooting the cosmic universe. Also, as Mike pointed out above, Ed Brubaker's run on Captain America--the Winter Soldier storyline is just fantastic.

My least favorite has got to be Secret Invasion. The concept is great--the shape-shifting Skrulls invade Earth by taking the form of various heroes and villains. Done right, this could have been a really atmospheric, paranoid thriller type of story. Who's real and who's a Skrull? What does it mean when no one trusts anyone and every super powered being is jumping at shadows?

Unfortunately, Bendis dispensed with all that after one issue, and then spent the rest of the series staging set piece battles that were as tedious as they were predictable. Just an awful series.

M - I tipped my hand earlier in terms of Brubaker's run on Captain America. Winter Soldier is probably my favorite storyline that I have read. Cap is already dealing with enough in terms of his personal identity, but to learn that his former sidekick who he thought was dead has been brainwashed and is an assassin was very powerful. I enjoyed watching Cap defend Bucky at the end of that arc and fought for his forgiveness despite his criminal past. The first storyline that really brought me into comics was The Infinity Gauntlet. What I really enjoyed about that, and what I think was missing in Infinity War, is the tragic side of Thanos. The pain he felt when Mistress Death rejected him time and time again made him a much more relatable character. I also enjoyed learning about characters I had never heard of at the time, including Adam Warlock and Silver Surfer.

In terms of storylines that fell flat, there are many, but Civil War II fell quite flat. The first Civil War was well done, but the second felt like a cash grab following a previous successful event. I do like that it focused on Captain Marvel, but catching criminals before they commit crimes has been done before and frankly it was done better than this event. I have a love/hate relationship with Bendis. He is an extremely talented writer, but does miss the mark from time to time.

SK - You've already mentioned a lot of the most memorable stuff.

Age of Apocalypse was a quite bloated event, but there were some enjoyable endtime riffs there. That said, visiting alternative futures with alternative versions of familiar characters is a trick that goes a bit stale before long. The Marvel universe would be a lot richer if they tried to come up with completely new characters instead of different alternative versions of the old ones, but I guess doing it this way is exponentially more profitable.

Daredevil: Born Again and Ghost Rider: Rise of the Midnight Sons are classics (just to mention two characters we have not yet touched upon), and I'm quite fond of Grant Morrison's X-Men run as well.

G - And how about all the endless rebooting, and consequent retelling of everyone's origin stories? I feel like this is a bigger problem for DC, though Marvel does it as well.

SK - I think it's a two-edged thing.

On the other hand you want to give the individual artists and writers the freedom to make the characters their own in the hopes that that they'll get around to doing something interesting and new, and on the other hand it gets sort of silly when the twentieth different version of Wolverine in the hands of Weapon X project gets thrown at you, and you would rather read something you haven't seen before nineteen times with some variation.

I generally don't believe that the characters should always stay the same, either. There's no point in reading X-Men or Daredevil today and complaining that they don't resemble Chris Claremont's X-Men or Frank Miller's Daredevil enough. All visionary creators brought something new to the characters.

I guess you are right about DC doing this more, though. Probably the destruction of Krypton and the deaths of Bruce Wayne's parents are even more central to their universe than any one character's origin to Marvel's.

G - The DC characters are also older, the iconic ones at least. So there are these competing forces: one the one hand, you have "let's make them dark and edgy for modern sensibilities"; on the other, you have "no, let's bring back the joyful golden/silver age aesthetic." You get that with Marvel as well, to a degree, but I feel like Marvel doesn't have the same identity crisis. Marvel's always been a bit edgy and complicated, or at least, has been since the 1970s. DC came to it later, and can't seem to figure out what they think people really want. So you have a reboot event that resets the tone one way or the other. And then you have another a few years later.

Not to bash on DC or anything--I like a lot of their stuff too. But I've always been attracted to the moral grayness that goes down to the DNA with Marvel-which, in a sense, is the whole point of Marvel. The heroes are often more than a bit iffy and the villains--well, many of them at least--are a bit relatable. Not all, of course--Ultron, for example, is not relatable. But you do get a lot of really compelling grayness. Magneto is trying to anticipate and safeguard against a genocide. Doctor Doom wants world peace. Thanos is just trying to impress his girlfriend. They're not evil, but rather just twisted.

Again, lots of the same over at DC, but outside Batman and related books, there's this urge to move away from that and reconnect with the golden age "sensawunda," where good is good and bad is bad, and I just don't care much for that in my superhero comics.

M - I think you both covered the issue of the reboot quite extensively and agree that it is a double-edged sword. Most of my favorite comics and events have distinct beginnings and ends. I feel a huge part of story writing is knowing when to end a story. Rebooting allows for a creator to make peace with a character and series and provides a fresh start for the new team that takes over. Just recently Charles Soule put the rabbit back in the hat for Daredevil and made his identity secret again. It was a reboot that happened in stride with the series and provided a great leaping on point for new readers. In an industry that does not have a great history of welcoming in new fans (I remember being greatly intimidated at the comic book store as a kid due to my lack of knowledge) well done reboots provide that small window of opportunity for new readers to pick up a book and start reading.

Okay, to finish off, let me ask both of you: what would you like to see happen in the Marvel (comics) universe? What kind of stories should be told but haven't as of yet? G - Great question! I'm a big fan of the cosmic stuff-always have been. But some characters who seem like they'd be great fits off-world have never really spent much time among the stars. Cosmic Magneto, anyone? I'd love to see that--the conflicted, not-quite-evil version of Magneto, maybe as a "court prisoner" to the Inhumans. Many possibilities there.

I'd also like to see Marvel try its hand at something really small-scale and personal, kind of like Identity Crisis was for DC. Note: I haven't forgotten how poorly Identity Crisis treats the rape of Sue Dibny and its aftermath. That is objectively terrible. But I do like how the story explores the long-simmering resentments and mistrust among members of the Justice League. And of course it's a mystery at heart. That's what I'd love to see from Marvel.

M - This is a tough one. I agree that going small scale and more personal would be a great move on Marvel's part. I think back to Mark Millar's Old Man Logan. While the alternate future was large in scale, the storytelling felt close and personal. The self-contained series felt like a breath of fresh air compared to the various ongoing series (although they did eventually turn this concept into an ongoing series).

I would like to see smaller stories that are self-contained. Allow the creators to provide a new take on characters in storylines that don't have to impact the greater Marvel Universe. Maybe set a different genre and release a set of mini-series in that theme instead of a traditional summer event. They could even be connected and self-contained to drum up the crossover sales. I would love to see pulp fiction, a mystery like The G mentioned, or more horror themed stories set in the Marvel Universe. **SK** - I'd be very happy to see superhero comics in which the core point is not just to show superpowered characters fighting. Sadly, they are quite rare and most of what you get is just action and fighting with not much else to hold your interest. I often get the feeling that stories about these amazing characters could have so much more depth if the creators tried to handle them (or were allowed to handle them) a little bit more as... well, I don't know... as real, interesting people instead of tools for getting some violence going.

Genre-wise, I think there's still a lot of untapped science fictionish potential as well. Maybe employing more SF/F writers (like Saladin Ahmed with Black Bolt) could be one way of getting there. There are also lots of interesting villains in the Marvel universe who could be developed a bit with their own miniseries, for example.

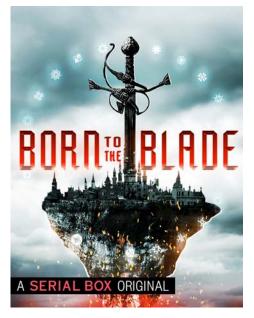
G - The Magneto miniseries was good, so I'd be down with that. A Doctor Doom series could be great too, or Mystique--actually there was a Mystique series, which ran for 23 issues. I should go back and re-read it. But yeah, in general I think minis from the villain's perspective are really fun. One of my favorites in recent years is the 4-issue Ronan the Accuser tie-in for Annihilation. He's not quite a hero yet, but rather an avatar of cold hard justice who will not be denied. That's my favorite take on the character--not quite a villain, not quite a hero. So that ties into Mike's point as well, that Marvel could use event tie-ins as a way to really develop character.

I also agree that many of the best superhero stories are the ones where violence is comparatively rare, or at least, where violence is secondary to character development. I mean, these are superhero comics--the fights are part of what make them fun. And comics readers sometimes grumble about more character-focused stories being "too slow." Like House of M. I loved House of M! It was really sad, which is not an emotion I normally associate with superhero comics, but that made it all the more interesting. On the other hand, you have something like Secret Invasion, where Bendis may have been overreacting to those "too slow" complaints. Here you have the perfect setup for a slow burn thriller, and it's done in one issue and on we go to the fold out mega fights. Meh.

Okay, I think that pretty much wraps things up. Thanks for joining me...I assume we're all going off to binge-read some Marvel comics now!

FIRESIDE CHAT: AMANDA ROSE SMITH OF SERIAL BOX VANCE K

One of our contributors, Shana, is also the social media manager for Serial Box, a company that creates and distributes serialized audio fiction. Think audiobooks with extra bells and whistles. Shana put me in touch with Amanda Rose Smith (@LadySoundSmith on Twitter), who is the audio producer and composer for most of Serial Box's output, including the new fantasy series Born to the Blade. This series has an impressive pedigree, and boasts a writing team of Michael R. Underwood, Marie Brennan, Malka Older, and Cassandra Khaw. Amanda is an audio pro with literally hundreds of audiobook credits under her belt, and production and composition credits for a number of other projects across many different media. We spoke through the interwebs to discuss some of the ways this type of audio production overlaps and differs from other kinds of production work. — Vance K



VK: Could you give a quick overview of your involvement with Serial Box? I know you composed the Born to the Blade theme, but does it go beyond that?

ARS: Yes, I'm actually the audio producer for just about all the series. So that means I cast (with their final approval) and coordinate the recording and post production. I do all the sound design and themes as well. There are a couple series I didn't do, such as The Witch Who Came in From the Cold and Belgravia, but that's it. VK: Gotcha. I listened to Born to the Blade Episode 1, and it wasn't exactly what I expected. I don't know why, but the notion of "serialized audio fiction" made me think of old radio shows, with full casts, etc. This was more like an audiobook with sound effects. Is that an accurate description? And for context, I loooove audiobooks.

ARS: Sort of! In the audio world, those old audio dramas are kind of antiquated and I didn't really want to harken back to an older form as much as work towards a newer one. Serial Box calls itself the HBO of reading, and I was thinking of it more as a hybrid between a television series and a book. So my [audio] effects are meant less to give sound to every little thing that might make sound, and more to just subtly make the listening experience a bit more immersive than it would be in a straight audiobook.

VK: Do some of the series feature a full-cast production, or are they exclusively a single narrator?

ARS: Some of them are multicast! Tremontaine has 3 narrators. It's still not like a radio play though, because they tend to narrate different sections from the point of view of different characters, less than speaking directly to each other.

VK: I want to circle back to the "audiobook with sound effects" thing later, but since you mentioned multiple narrators, that leads me to something else. When you're dealing with something that's hours long, are your narrators there with you in-studio, or do they all record separately and then send in the audio? The last time I did a lot of voice over recording, I insisted on bringing them in because — I know many performers have home studios — but I was too nervous as a producer to cede control of the read to someone I hadn't worked with before. What's your approach?

ARS: I do both in different situations. Sometimes I also direct via Skype. If someone is going to record at home, I often do that for the first episode, but we also do comprehensive listen downs and rounds of corrections. So if someone does record at home, self-directed, we make changes as needed if something feels off.

VK: What is that "listen down" like? How many people are involved?

ARS: It varies. Sometimes its just me. Oftentimes, the series producers listen before a piece airs as well. And,

depending on the project, I sometimes enlist proofers to listen and note any mistakes. Every episode gets listened to at least twice before airing, which is really important for quality, I think.

VK: How meticulous can you afford to be in line readings and nuances of performance? My work with narration and voice over has extended only to projects that are less than an hour in length, but I'll drill down on almost any single line that isn't as good as I feel it can be. But when you expand out to novel/ series-length work, I assume there have to be "we can live with it" moments.

ARS: It does happen sometimes. And certain things are also subjective. It's not always a matter of it being wrong, but of different interpretations. When it comes to straight errors, I'm pretty serious about that, but all the actors we work with are truly fantastic and sometimes their interpretation is something I might not have thought of, but it's still great.

VK: Yeah, that happens a lot. This isn't any kind of revelation, but I feel like the longer the project, the more crucial that trust in the person you've cast becomes. If I'm doing something very brief, I feel like I've got a bag of tricks that can get almost anybody through to a workable final product. But that only holds for so long. What is your casting process, then? Do performers read small samples, do you work off of recommendations, etc?

ARS: I've been working in the audiobook world for about 10 years, so I'm fortunate enough to have a lot of actor contacts. So I draw on them a lot. Generally I get a lot of auditions, pare it down to a few people I think are all great, and then make the final decision from those people with the producers of the series. But trust is SO key. Like, for me, following audition instructions is really important. If you don't do that, how can I trust you to take care of the project?

VK: Right. Circling back, I'm curious what the decision-making process is for how to structure your approach to sound design on a project like Born to the Blade. The canvas seems so vast, you could do an entire start-to-finish sound mix, but instead you pick your spots. What helps govern your approach when the options seem endless?

ARS: Well, obviously time is a factor, as much as I wish it weren't. But it's also an aesthetic choice — for me, it's about supporting the actor's performance, enhancing it,

but not competing with it. It's not like a visual medium, where you can design around the dialogue. The whole thing is dialogue. So you have to consider that with the effects, to make sure you aren't covering the performance up. All the information about the story is coming primarily from their words.

VK: Do you have any insight into what's driving the push into serialized fiction at the moment? A couple of years ago John Scalzi started releasing The Human Division as a serial, which harkens back to old...I mean, Dickensian...publishing models, but now the trend seems to have caught on. Is it the influence of podcasting? Something else?

ARS: I think podcasting has a lot to do with it...people are doing a lot of multi-tasking, and I think that these episodes are great for commuting, or doing things around the house. It can be nice to have a bite-sized story rather than a full novel, and also following along with something as its being released, weekly, or monthly, or what have you.

VK: Before moving on, I have to ask — there are people who physically make books who can't stand to read them, there are grips who make movies who can't stand to watch them, etc. — do you get to enjoy podcasts and audiobooks yourself, or does being in the trenches make you want to keep them at arms' length, as a consumer?

ARS: It can be hard. I'm not sure if it's that I want to keep them at arm's length in general, or just that since I spend so much time listening to them that it can be nice to get away. I have about 1000 books under my belt in general, including Serial Box and my other work, I probably end up working on around 75-100 books a year so I don't always want to hear more in my free time, especially since it can be hard not to listen with a work-critical ear. BUT that said, I also really, really enjoy listening to the ones I work on, and sometimes have to re-listen to passages because I was into the story and not paying close-enough attention to the accuracy or what have you. So I really do enjoy listening to them, and I think if for some reason I weren't working on so many I would listen a lot.

VK: That's always a nice feeling. Getting lost in something you helped bring into being.

ARS: Totally!!! I had the Born to the Blade theme stuck in my head for two days, and was really proud of that.

VK: Can we talk about your music? Music started my journey into the arts, and into my career. I started off in a band, we decided to make a music video, made album art, etc., and that got me hired to do graphics, and then video work, etc...So I'm always interested in other artists' journeys. How did your creative/music endeavors intersect with a career in audio production?

ARS: Well, I started off as a classical composition major, specifically interested in film music, and I started engineering originally to record my own music. And then found that I loved that, too. Interestingly enough, my work study was with the office of disability services recording textbooks onto tape for blind and dyslexic students with one of those old little dictation recorders. I'd get their weekly assignments and then read them aloud.

VK: The tools have changed a little bit.

ARS: Heh. For sure. When I was graduating, I realized that as a composer and musician, making a career was... challenging. I come from a poor background and there wasn't anyone able to subsidize a beginning composition career. So given that, I liked recording, I decided to continue school in that vein, and ended up getting a masters in music technology from NYU. Over the years, all the different backgrounds and skills have just kind of... merged interestingly. Recording, composing, and also the out-loud expression of stories. Working for Serial Box has been a particularly cool way to mix all those skill sets.

VK: Between the Born to the Blade theme and the work you have on your website, I'd certainly describe your music as "cinematic." B2tB is as epic and sweeping as you'd expect in a fantasy TV show or movie. Do you bring a sense of genre (of the overall project) to bear when you start composing, or is it rooted in character, story scope, etc?

ARS: Definitely both. Part of what I love about this kind of composition is the opportunity to step into so many different worlds and genres. Just in the themes...Born to the Blade, Remade, Royally Yours, False Idols...they're all totally different styles. I've always been a giant nerd, and most of the other projects I work on are smaller scope, so I was particularly psyched about B2B. I so rarely get to use choirs in my pieces!

VK: When you're digging into pieces that are very different in terms of genre, do you find yourself relying on your training, or do you seek out a lot of examples

in that style that you look to for inspiration?

ARS: Both. I always ask the series producer for a few links, even something on YouTube, that they like and that they feel is in the vein of what they want. And if possible, I try to wait until I've finished recording and creating the first episode until I finalize the theme, so I know that it fits with the genre but also the characters and mood and plot trajectory. Music is such an emotional thing, it's hard to explain what something should be in words. Just saying something like "fantasy, epic" means so many different things to so many people.

VK: This is something I struggle with: if you're trying to do a piece that's "like" something else...like a fantasy theme, or like a mystery thing...do you try to nail that thing — the best Amanda Rose Smith version of a mystery theme, for instance — or do you also try to subvert expectations in some ways?

ARS: I don't try to subvert anything unless I think that's part of the process. An old professor of mine once said that in a film, the score is like an invisible actor, or the psyche of a character. It doesn't add something that isn't there, but it does illuminate something that someone might not know is there. So that could subvert expectations in some instances, but that's not my goal. So, for Born to the Blade, it's epic, but its also emotional. There's a lot of political stuff there, and stories about cultures that have been subverted by other ones. So I didn't want to only go big and bombastic, but also to inject some emotion into it.

VK: I think you did. If I remember right, you did some academic work on whether regular folks can tell the difference between acoustic and sampled instruments.

ARS: Yes! That's what my master's thesis was on. Of course that was a decade ago now, but still.

VK: How does that inform your approach to recording? I assume you're mixing live and sampled instruments in a lot of your work?

ARS: Well, mostly due to time constraints, these themes have been largely computer only. But when the opportunity arises, I do like to mix the two, even if listeners can't tell the difference. That doesn't mean it's not worthwhile, for the same reason that an actor's interpretation might be worthwhile even if it's not the same as mine would be. Real live musicians bring their own soul to the work. I've heard other people play things that I've written and

thought, "Wow! I didn't even know it could sound like that"

VK: Another lovely feeling.

ARS: I wrote my first orchestral piece when I was 17, and though it was pretty terrible in retrospect, I remember that feeling well.

VK: But for all of that, people can't generally tell the difference, is what you're saying?

ARS: Generally not. Even when I did my experiment in 2008, people only guessed right about half the time. Tut there are certain instruments and genres that are harder to do all with computer.

VK: For sure. But regardless of the method of production, I feel like the goal is always to land emotionally with the listener, or viewer. So if you can accomplish that, what does it matter if the strings are synths or not?

ARS: Agreed!

VK: It seems like in a lot of ways your Serial Box gig is kind of a perfect one for you — you get to bring a lot of strengths to bear. Is this sort of a dream project, or is something dangling out there that you think, "One day I'd really love to...?"

ARS: I think that to some degree, just because of my personality type, I'll always have those dangling ideas. But to be honest, it really IS a fantastic gig for that reason. I get to merge a lot of different skill sets, but also the projects are all super high-quality, and the producers I work with really respect me and the skills and ideas I bring to the table. I feel that I'm really allowed to do a lot creatively. In a perfect world, every project would also have unlimited time for completion too! But alas I can't keep the listeners waiting forever.

Check out Born to the Blade here. And take a look at our (very positive) review of the first two episodes here.

FIRESIDE CHAT: BRIAN RAMOS CHLOE

Welcome to the latest Fireside Chat! I sat down (ie emailed back and forth, but I'm sure there was a roaring fire at some point) with Brian Ramos, an all-around awesome person with degrees in engineering and a Masters in International Space Studies. He previously did work with Engineering World Health (a non-profit that works to improve healthcare systems in developing countries). He also recently completed an 8 month long stint in the HI-SEAS Mars habitat. This essentially saw him living inside a dome, next to one volcano and on the slopes of another, alongside a small crew, to help the study of what these kind of living conditions would be like for potential future manned missions to Mars. So we talked about his experiences and his ideas about depictions of space in media and science-fiction.- Chloe



Can you tell us a bit about your background and interest in space and science?

My academic background is in Biomedical and Electrical Engineering. I also have a degree in International Space Studies from the International Space University in Strasbourg, France. My professional experience ranges from working on improving medical care in developing countries to work in the space industry. As much as possible, I try and make as much of my life about exploration, and both traveling and space/science fulfill this need (living in a dome on a volcano included).

Because you brought it up in there, can you explain

the dome part of your answer?

Although living in a dome may seem as if it's the opposite of exploration, given its stationary nature, it fulfilled this need to delve into a different way of life. It was an adventure in its own way. Rather than trekking around the world, what happens when you step outside of it entirely? What happens when you're able to turn down all the noise and tear yourself away from the constant connectivity of the modern world? These were the sort of questions I was able to answer or at least dive into with the experience. On a more surface level, there was also a lot to learn through the research and performing of work, such as exploring lava tube caves.

Do you think the experience inside the habitat changed your perception of how community and/or relationships in space/sci-fi media are portrayed?

I haven't thought about its connection to space media, as much as it's given me some insight into how a real astronaut may feel under certain conditions; such as what may actually be necessary or unnecessary for creating a positive work and living environment, in an isolated space.

I did give thoughts to some sci-fi pieces such as I Am Legend or the movie Passengers in relation to being isolated. I tried to imagine how different I would feel if I were on the same mission alone.

What kind of space media (books, movies, tv) have you enjoyed? What made these works stand out positively to you?

I'm going to have to say Firefly is probably my favorite space-themed show. Its incredible writing, character backgrounds and interactions, and well-meaning but stern protagonist all make me wish the series had continued. There's something enticing about a group who lives job-to-job, traveling around to different planets. It scratches a certain traveler's itch and envy, you know, except without the forced life of crime.

For movies, I've enjoyed the new Star Trek movies (the first in particular), Star Wars, and movies like Arrival. Star Trek provided this fantasy of an organization that anyone could join and lead a life, and career, exploring and observing the universe—basically a dream come true for any of us who would want to leave the planet someday. Plus, there's a market for skills like martial arts; so, for once, my childhood hobbies would be respected on a resume! Additionally, the idea of Star Trek's prime directive is a really important thought in science fiction, I think. Having a rule of not meddling is something that we, as humans, rarely emphasize enough in practice. The crews in Star Trek aren't looking to create settlements or colonize, but instead exploring to understand. I've enjoyed that idea of exploration rooted in good moral intentions, as well as the thought of curiosity being enough of a motivator for us to go out there.

I've enjoyed movies that try and have a degree of realism involved. The Martian or Gravity might be good examples of this. Though they're not perfect, they have some elements that relate to actual space exploration as we know it, and that can be exciting for someone who knows the field. That being said, I don't think that realism is necessary in science fiction. If anything, I want the media to take me somewhere new—show me possibilities rather than reality. Arrival did a nice job of this. Both the short story and the movie ask questions, and propose possibilities, that leave you thinking a while after the credits roll. It begged for conversation.

It wouldn't be fair if I left out movies about actual space missions. Apollo 13 is probably the best example of this. Truth is often more engaging than fiction, and the story of what those men went through is engaging in every aspect.

Since you brought up films about actual space missions, I'm curious as to whether you feel those kind of films have an easier or harder time depicting space (since they have to stick to realism)? And, do you think it's important for non-realistic science fiction to still realistically depict space? If so, why?

I'm not sure that it's a question of whether one is easier or harder to depict space, but perhaps more about the intent. A movie about Apollo 13 would likely go to great lengths to get the story correct, consulting with experts and the like, and the dramatization might be amplified for storytelling purposes. They consult experts on movies such as Star Trek, as well, a lot of times, but they don't necessarily strive to be accurate and I don't think they really need to be.

What are your feelings/thoughts on science-fiction?

Oddly, space fiction isn't something I indulge in much. Science-fiction in general does have a lot of utility. First and foremost, it needs to be good entertainment. Anything beyond that is a bonus. Science fiction does a good job of sparking ideas and showing off what kinds of things we may be able to create or want in the future.

The most valuable thing science fiction provides, for me, is a barometer for our society's current trends. Culture drives everything, and space exploration is no exception. As interest in space and science has increased throughout the last several years, so has the amount of shows, movies, and projects about space. Ten years ago, only people in the industry could tell you what SpaceX was. Now, Elon Musk is a well-known name, complete with appearances in science-fiction blockbuster movies, such as Iron Man 2.

What are things you'd like to see more of in science fiction (ideas, technologies, etc)?

I'd like to see more depth, in general. Science fiction, like any work of fiction, is stronger when it urges us to question ourselves and the world around us.

I would love to see more movies like Moon. In general, I'd love for filmmakers or whoever greenlights those films to feel less inclined to put in action scenes or pointless explosions into movies just for the sake of it. I loved 90% of Passengers—having to make the choice of waking someone up in the face of an eternity alone, at the expense of guilt, is a fascinating concept all on its own. I could have done without the engine heat body-blasting. These pieces don't often offer up much, and often detract from the story.

That being said, given that no filmmakers will read this and think, 'by gosh, he's right!', I'll go ahead and say, at the very least, I would not be opposed to Star Wars adding a heavy second dose of Donnie Yen or more lightsaber battles. Nobody goes to those movies hoping to see Darth Vader falling in love.

You're interested in cultural issues and aspects of space, as well as the science, is that something that you'd like to see addressed more in science-fiction? What are your feelings on science fiction's depictions of exploring and living on other planets? Having had the habitat experience, do you think there's specific elements of living on another planet that you'd like to see depicted?

I'm going to answer your questions in what might be a different way than what you're asking.

The old saying that truth is stranger than fiction is very true. If someone were looking for science fiction inspiration, I would look towards organizations that look at concepts for things like multigenerational worldships – the concept of having a self-sustaining society, contained within a ship, which would travel over many generations before reaching their destination. These are real studies that consider launching a group of people into space, with the knowledge that the ones who arrive at the destination will not be the ones who left Earth. Because of the complexity of the scenario, there are a lot of interesting questions that arise from the thought exercise. What might religions look like in that worldship, for example? Would they exist at all? Would they be Earth-based religions or something new? Would religions that focus on Earth matter to people who had never seen it? What happens when a terrible leader comes to power in one of the generations? How likely is that to happen? What might an economy look like on this ship?

These are just a few examples but the point is that a creator can take one simple concept -a Mars base, a worldship, the theory of panspermia, and run with the idea. Start with the truth and show me where your mind runs to.

Where do you hope to see the representation of space in science fiction and media go?

I'd like to see a growing demand and supply for space-related science fiction, simply because it shows that people are becoming interested in the topic. NASA is a publicly-funded organization, which means it depends on voters who care about space exploration. Without a desire and popularization of space exploration, I think it will be difficult for us to go anywhere interesting. At the end of the day, people need to care about the search for life and thirst for understanding of our universe.

For people wishing to learn more about space, what would be good resources?

It depends on what sort of space they're trying to learn about. There is a lot on the NASA.gov website about their research and progress. Speakers, such as Neil Degrasse Tyson, do a great job of being effective space communicators. I urge people to look outside of what NASA is doing. There are space programs, in many different nations, that look to leverage space in new and interesting ways. For those looking for an academic institution to grow their space industry knowledge, I highly recommend The International Space University.

Are you involved in the creation of anything space media related? (This question is essentially so you can plug your podcast, because I am helpful like that) Yes! We run a podcast called Space For Everyone that's going to explore interesting aspects of the space industry, ranging from religion to space organizations in developing nations. Our goal is to showcase the international and cultural aspects of space exploration. I also run The Traveling Spaceman blog which talks about my HI-SEAS mission and other lessons learned through exploring the Earth.

Since often the focus, at least in the news and popular media, on space is linked to technology and exploration, are there aspects of space or space exploration that you wished people talked about more?

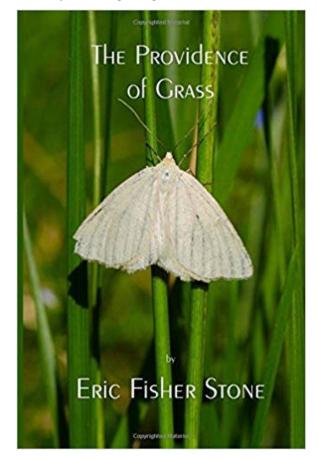
There are a couple of things.

This isn't unique to space exploration, but news media tends to focus on the accidents. When something goes wrong and people's lives are threatened, there is a ton of coverage. There isn't a lot when things are running smoothly. When the space shuttle program was cancelled, many people back home asked me what I thought of 'NASA being shut down'. The International Space Station has been flying for over 15 years consistently and I think that should be recognized. When things are running smoothly, we tend to take for granted that the astronauts there are risking their lives every time they strap themselves to a rocket.

I wished that people connected more with the idea of exploration being something we should do simply because we are, because we exist and we can. No one asks why we want to breathe or be loved. We all understand that those of us who are addicted to traveling or space feel the same way about hopping on a plane or discovering a possible signal of life on another planet.

ECO-SPECULATION #4: INTERVIEW WITH ERIC FISHER STONE PHOEBE WAGNER

To wrap up these posts about animals in speculative fiction, I chatted with the poet Eric Fisher Stone, a passionate lover of all living things.



PW: Great to have you, Eric. Could you introduce yourself and your work for the folx at home?

EFS: My name is Eric Fisher Stone. I'm originally from Fort Worth, Texas where I went to public schools and college at Texas Christian University. I volunteered at a nature center where I cared for captive wild animals that couldn't be released, and worked in different retails jobs while the economy slowly recovered, until I applied to MFA programs. I was accepted at Iowa State University, which is for the best, I think, due to the program's emphasis on place and the environment, which also reflects my creative work. My work is mainly poetry.

My poems usually range from narrative poems, formal and informal lyrical poems, and they usually delve into an otherness larger than humanity, and certainly larger than the self. That otherness can be nonhuman animals, like snails or deer, or in my most recently published book, The Providence of Grass, the affirmative driving force behind the cosmos—what makes gravity happen, what causes the stars to burn, not simply a causal "equal and opposite reaction" to inanimate forces, and not a supernatural intelligence hierarchically greater than matter, rather, my poems celebrate the earth and the cosmos as miraculous, living realities. Rather than bemoan the demise of species, and possibly humanity during the Anthropocene, I want us to appreciate the miraculous revelation of the world. If we can't appreciate what's left, how will know what has value, and why we should save it?

PW: What was your path to environmentalism? Any books play a part in that journey?

EFS: As a kid my parents took me out west on camping trips to Big Bend National Park, on the border of far southwest Texas and northern Mexico where there are very large forms, open skies of glittering stars, mountains and boulders, canyons and rivers. I learned to love the Chihuahuan Desert Ecosystem, but I also became acutely aware of my parent's backyard in Fort Worth, where I'd upturn rotting wood and cinderblocks just to stare in wonder at the insects, worms and pill bugs. I became entranced with not only the sublime immensity of mountains and big skies, but also what Blake called "a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower." I got a microscope for my birthday and discovered worlds without end.

As a child I read lots of atlases and field guides to animals. During my teen years I thought writers were supposed to be grownups-a mistake to be sure!-so I read American realist fiction like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, DH Lawrence, from which I learned a lot, but only Lawrence seemed as mystical and romantic as me. I had a better aptitude for poetry, and in my late teens I read the English Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, (I couldn't get that deep into Lord Byron as his vision seemed more personal than universal) where the imagination and the sublime were not discarded as irrational, childish ideas, but integral to a fuller experience of the world, and allows people to be more sensitive and ethical. Of course no list of mine is complete without Walt Whitman, because I am a US American, it's impossible for me to be a romantic without being a disciple of Whitman. I read Spanish language authors later, Garcia Marquez's Hundred Years of Solitude, Borges' labyrinthine fantasies of the mind and spirit, and the poetry of Pablo Neruda. It's hard for me to come with a complete list because so many writers have been influential to me in different periods of my life. But these are among my favorites, but not my only favorites. I have many more, well beyond the limited demographic of dead white males I listed. I like Yusef Komunyakaa, Mary Oliver and Luis Alberto Urrea. Ben Okri's novel The Famished Road is a spectacular piece of magic realism most Americans haven't read. And I love everything I've read by Haruki Murakami, both realist and fantastical.

PW: I didn't read The Wind in the Willows until I was in my twenties, but even though it's a "kids" book, I still read it at least once a year. What books about animals did you love as a kid? How about as an adult?

EFS: I loved and still love Charlotte's Web. E.B. White's tale describes the durability of true friendship that even survives death. I like how Watership Down by Richard Adams uses rabbits to create a new mythology, a mythology of and by rabbits. Surely other creatures have language. Our species in its arrogance will sometimes dismiss whale song or bird chirping as mere sound. It's pretty clear midway through Melville's Moby Dick that the white whale is not the villain--it's American industrial capitalism, and the monster is us. My best friend growing was a male tricolor collie named Jamie (a male collie, my parents named him after a Scottish Doctor Who character) so I loved to read Lassie Come Home by Eric Knight in my early teens. When I began to read Orwell's Animal Farm, I really wanted the animals to succeed in their revolution, and became sad when I realized the pigs were merely representations of human folly.

PW: Many science fiction and fantasy stories personify animals (or nonhuman beings in general). Brian Jacques' Redwall series for example. Do you think there is value in personifying animals in literature?

EFS: Yes! But there is a fine line between personifying animals as stereotypes for people. Perhaps that's why I never got that into Aesop's Fables, because the animals aren't there on their own terms, rather than foxes and snakes and turtles, they're humans dressed as those creatures. Jack London also seemed to project his own brutalist vision of nature onto Buck, the dog, in The Call of the Wild. Richard Adams makes the rabbits more than just abstract representations of people in Watership Down and that's why I like it.

PW: When you write about nonhuman beings in your

work, what do you hope the reader feels?

EFS: I hope the reader experiences wonder, the exuberance of being and sharing the world with animals like deer, coyotes and the myriad species of mollusks, and other animals we have not discovered. I hope my readers experience joy and that I can help readers realize that happiness doesn't come from achieving the right goals, it comes from appreciating the miracle before us. I mean, we share a planet with cute razorback musk turtles. That's amazing!

PW: Any book suggestions for our readers?

EFS: American Primitive by Mary Oliver, The Book of Gods and Devils by Charles Simic, South of the Border, West of the Sun by Haruki Murakami, Animal's People by Indra Sinha, The Famished Road by Ben Okri, and because too many people think Pablo Neruda only wrote love poems, Canto General translated by Jack Schmidt.

PW: Wonderful, thanks for virtually hanging out with me here at Nerds. Where can our readers find your work?

EFS: My first full length poetry collection just came out. Here it is on Amazon.

My poetry has been published in about 20 or so journals, including, but not limited to Poets Reading the News, Modern Poetry Quarterly Review, The Hopper, The Lyric and Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review.

PW: And finally, what is your favorite animal?

EFS: My favorite animal is a collared peccary, more commonly known as the javelina!

6 BOOKS WITH REBECCA ROANHORSE JOE SHERRY

Rebecca Roanhorse is a Nebula Award-winning speculative fiction writer, a Hugo/Sturgeon/Locus Award Finalist, and a 2017 Campbell Award Finalist for Best New SFF writer. Her debut novel TRAIL OF LIGHTNING Book #1 in the SIXTH WORLD SERIES (Saga Press) drops June 26th, 2018. Book #2 STORM OF LO-CUSTS follows in April 2019.

Today she shares her six books with us...



1. What book are you currently reading?

I am currently reading Witchmark by C.L. Polk. This book is likely the polar opposite of mine. It is set in an alternative world based on Edwardian England and there are bicycle chases and proper teas and a lot of painfully restrained desires. I am loving it all. The world and the characters are so richly drawn that I'm sucked in. It feels read and I keep forgetting that this is a secondary world only inspired by Edwardian England and not England itself, just with mages and witches and angel fey. There's also a murder mystery at the center of the book and a mysterious illness infecting veterans of a colonial war. I'm about halfway through and can't wait to get some time to finish it this weekend.

2. What upcoming book you are really excited about?

I am really excited for P. Djèlí Clark's The Black God's Drum. I mean, that cover alone was enough to get me to press the preorder button. But throw in an alternate New Orleans populated with Haitian pirates and airships and a girl who talks to orisha of wind and storms and I'm sold.

3. Is there a book you're currently itching to re-read?

I have comfort reads that I often return to when I'm stressed or just need a break. They are the equivalent of a cozy blanket. One of those is The Black Jewels Trilogy by Anne Bishop. I've read it so many times, I probably should have it memorized by now. Warning: It's a dark book with a lot of sexual violence in a sexually violent society, so it might not be everyone's cup of tea but the story feels like a survivor's story to me in a lot of ways, and I am drawn to that.

4. How about a book you've changed your mind about over time--either positively or negatively?

There's probably a lot of books that I loved but likely didn't withstand the test of time. I was obsessed with the Dragonlance Chronicles as a teen but I'm afraid to go back and read them now. Fellow fans who loved them as kids and are now adults have warned me they didn't age well, so I shall keep them pure and perfect in my teen mind forever and won't be picking them up again. I may, however, recommend them to my 10 year old.

5. What's one book, which you read as a child or young adult, that has had a lasting influence on your writing?

Probably all of them. My imagination is a sponge. But I would say the book that has stuck with me the most is Dune by Frank Herbert. I love everything about that book. I think I read it at just the right time in my formation for it to really help me imagine what can be done in the genre. I loved it then, and still do.

6. And speaking of that, what's *your* latest book, and why is it awesome?

Trail of Lighting is my debut novel that drops June 26th. The elevator pitch was an Indigenous Mad Max: Fury Road. It's set in a post-apocalyptic future where most of the world has been lost, but the Navajo reservation, now known by its ancestral name, Dinétah, has been reborn. The gods and heroes of legend walk the land, but so do the monsters, and it's up to our protagonist, Maggie Hoskie, to fight the monsters both physical and metaphorical. I guess readers will have to decide if it's awesome or not, but certainly having a badass Navajo monsterhunter as your protagonist doesn't hurt. I mean, have you seen that cover?

6 BOOKS WITH SETH DICKINSON JOE SHERRY

Seth Dickinson's short fiction has appeared in Analog, Asimov's, Clarkesworld, Lightspeed, Strange Horizons, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, among others. He is an instructor at the Alpha Workshop for Young Writers, winner of the 2011 Dell Magazines Award, and a lapsed student of social neuroscience. He lives in Brooklyn, New York. The Traitor Baru Cormorant was his debut novel. You can find him on Twitter as @SethJDickinson.

Today he shares his 6 books with us...



1. What book are you currently reading?

Before bed I'm verrrrrry slowly working my way through The Power Broker, which is the story of Robert Moses, the man who built modern New York. He began as an idealistic reformer, but constant obstructions drove him to seek power by any means, until that desire consumed him! It's extremely on brand. (He was a really bad person).

I'm also reading Strange Practice by Vivian Shaw, which is about a doctor whose practice treats the supernatural population of London, and Eternity by Greg Bear, which is the sequel to a childhood favorite book about the discovery of an asteroid whose interior goes on forever.

I just finished Jade City by Fonda Lee, Ship of Fools/ Unto Leviathan by Richard Paul Russo, and The FreezeFrame Revolution by Peter Watts.

2. What upcoming book you are really excited about?

The Mirror and the Light by Hilary Mantel, the last in the Wolf Hall trilogy about Thomas Cromwell. All that's left is his downfall and execution! If you enjoy epic fantasy you should read these books; they are beautiful, intricate thrillers about a common man tasked by the King to find a way out of his (the King's) marriage.

3. Is there a book you're currently itching to re-read?

I do a lot of re-reading, so the itch usually gets scratched pretty fast. I recently went on a World War III kick — Red Storm Rising, Fire Lance, Team Yankee, Red Army, Eon, and Ghost Fleet.

I think I would like to reread Code Name Verity by Elizabeth Wein, a YA novel about a young British spy imprisoned in Nazi-occupied France. After four years or so I'm probably ready to endure the pain.

Oh! And I want to do a reread of the viral 9mother-9horse9eyes...thing, the 'flesh interfaces' meta-fuckery story that some genius improvised on the Internet in 2016.

4. How about a book you've changed your mind about over time--either positively or negatively?

Guns, Germs, and Steel. When I read it in high school I thought it was the smartest thing ever written. Now it's pretty obviously reductionist. (I'm not, like, clever for figuring this out, there's a bot on the history reddit whose only job is to post disclaimers about GG&S.)

I used to think Pale Fire was a clever postmodern novel with a 'true' story hidden behind the one we're given. Now I know that Zembla is real and John Shade failed its people.

God, I can never remember enough books.

5. What's one book, which you read as a child or young adult, that has had a lasting influence on your writing?

The novelization of Star Wars Episode III by Matthew Stover, no, hang on, I'm serious here. The movie is...at best kind of a clunker, with long dull walk-and-talks and some really anodyne action scenes breaking up the genuinely good stuff. But the book is a pulp-art masterpiece; it hits all the same beats, uses all the same characters, and yet it really sings. It's got this vitality to it. It's brutal, it's funny, it's mythic. How'd he do that? I want to figure that out. I haven't, but I want to.

6. And speaking of that, what's *your* latest book, and why is it awesome?

The Monster Baru Cormorant is the story of Agonist — Baru Cormorant as one of the secret rulers behind the Imperial Throne. She has the power to overthrow the empire that colonized her home. But what did getting that power cost her? She betrayed so many people knowing that's possible, that level of deceit, can she ever bring herself to trust anyone again? Can she think of herself as worthy of love, or happiness? Is she going to be alone forever? Can you be alone forever?

Fiction is full of these characters who scheme and manipulate. If you're not a sociopath (Baru's not) I think that would be really depressing, really lonely...I wanted to write a character who ran face-first into that wall. You can't just go on being cruel to yourself, being alone, utterly devoted to your purpose. You've got to have something for yourself.

Anyway: Baru is one of the secret rulers of the world, war is looming, she's been given a quest to find the secret of immortality, her brain damage is making her hallucinate, and she's afraid her whole life has been manipulated by the man who made her. And, as ever, she's deep within an empire she secretly wants to overthrow and destroy. She has a lot on her plate. And she can't even see the whole plate! Because she has hemineglect. Poor woman.

VISUAL MEDIA REVIEWS

MICROREVIEW [FILM]: BLACK PANTHER

THE G



The best Marvel film I've seen - by far.

I have a confession to make: I just don't love superhero films. I've loved superhero comics since I was a kid--and, at several points in my life, collected them. But the film adaptations rarely do it for me. Sure, there are plenty that I've enjoyed on first view, but only a few that I've actually wanted to see again. The ones that make the cut can be counted on one hand: Batman (1990), The Dark Knight (2008), The Avengers (2012) and Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014). And even with those, the law of diminishing returns applies. Black Panther is different; this is a film I think I could see twenty times or more.

Black Panther is, at base, a very well made blockbuster. It does a good job integrating back story with foregrounded action--not always a guarantee in this genre. It is well-paced, with a tight balance between action and character exposition. The acting performances are almost uniformly good, and it looks and sounds brilliant (more on that later). Also, it contains a plot twist that is genuinely surprising, but which also feels intuitive. These qualities already mark it as a cut above most superhero films. This is not just Save the Cat for the Nth time.

But it's the richness and wonder of Black Panther's world-building that truly sets it apart. Much has been made about how Black Panther centers blackness, and how rare this is in blockbuster action films. To me, though, it is more striking and significant that it centers Africa and African-ness.

Watching the film really underscores how uncommon this is. In most cases, Africa is the backdrop to a film about a white protagonist (e.g. Blood Diamond). This is often the case for Hollywood films set in Asia as well (e.g. The Last Samurai, The Great Wall). However, China, Hong Kong and Japan have strong film industries as well, so films that center Chinese- or Japanese-ness are pretty easy to find in most countries. African films, on the other hand, rarely penetrate the global consciousness...which means that the rare Hollywood film will be all that many audiences ever see of Africa. Making matters worse, the Hollywood view of Africa is almost monotonically focused on deprivation.

Exceptions to the rule are rare--there's The Lion King, which is about animals not people, and Coming to America, 90 percent of which takes place in Queens. Both have an almost exclusively American cast. Here, though, we have a film with an African protagonist, a mostly African supporting cast and set in a modern African society. Many of the actors are either African or of recent African descent as well. The main white character, played by our own English Scribbler Martin Freeman, is the sidekick--a role usually reserved for a black actor.

This is meaningful to me personally. As a kid I loved Fantomen, the Swedish iteration of Lee Falk's The Phantom. The comic was very progressive for its time (1930s), offering a sympathetic view of Africa and Africans and a negative view of their colonial exploitation. As I grew older, though, I realized how The Phantom relegated black Africans to side characters in what should have been their own story, and so robbed them of agency. I've always wondered why the many reboots of this otherwise excellent comic franchise didn't just make the Phantom black. To my knowledge, it hasn't happened yet.

The Black Panther comic introduced in the 1970s was, in some ways, a response to The Phantom, as well as all the other African stories centering white saviors. The film feels like a powerful response to every white savior film ever made.

Another interesting element of the film is that it also centers women. More than half of the film's central characters are women, and they are strong, independent women as well. Danai Gurira is electrifying as General Okoye, leader of the elite Dora Milaje warriors, as is Lupita Nyong'o as spy and T'Challa love interest Nakia.

None of this would matter much if the film were bad or mediocre--but it is in fact an exceptionally well-made blockbuster, first and foremost for the reasons I outlined above. However, it is also exception for how meticulously writer/director Ryan Coogler built Wakanda. The sets, costumes, rituals and institutions are draw from African cultures and symbols, as well as the modern tradition of Afro-futurism that gave us the comic character Black Panther in the first place. The effect is stunning, from a visual perspective--as well as unique within the genre. The soundtrack and incidental music are also really striking, enhancing the sense of place as well as dramatic tension throughout the film.

I also appreciated that Black Panther, in the best Marvel tradition, invites us to sympathize with the villain's cause, even as we recoil from his chosen methods. I won't get farther into it, for fear of spoiling the movie for you.

Since this is Nerds of a Feather, I'd be remiss if I didn't nitpick something--nothing is perfect after all. I have two relatively minor complaints. First, there are a couple moments when the film goes overboard with the CGI, in a way that will look dated in just a few years. These are relatively few and far between, though. Second, there is an element to the central plot twist that doesn't make a lot of sense unless you add more exposition. This did annoy me, but not enough to detract from my enjoyment of the film.

Black Panther is the best blockbuster film I've seen since Gravity, and the best superhero film I've ever seen. By a mile.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 9/10.

Bonuses: +1 for world building; +1 for centering Africa and Africanness; +1 for going beyond the Save the Cat formula.

Penalties: -1 for too much CGI at a couple pivotal moments; -1 for element of plot twist that, on consideration, doesn't make a lot of sense.

Nerd Coefficient: 10/10. "Mind-blowing/life-chang-ing."

MICRO(?)REVIEW [VIDEO GAME]: ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY BY UBISOFT (DEVELOPER) BRIAN



Blood on the Sand

Assassin's Creed Odyssey (ACO) is a role-playing game. I know I said it was moving in this direction with last year's Assassin's Creed Origins, but this entry in the series is as much of a RPG as The Witcher 3. But where Origins last year pushed Assassin's Creed further into RPG territory and further away from the focus of assassinations, ACO takes this series even further from its roots. In fact, this entry may as well be an entirely different franchise.

In ACO, you can select from the start whether you want to play as Kassandra (woman) or Alexios (man). Either way, you are a Spartan in exile, a descendant of Leonidas himself, during the Peloponnesian War. In the broad game world, Sparta and Athens are at each other's throats. In the story's winding path, you learn more about your destiny and how the Cult of Kosmos is attempting to leverage your bloodline to control the world.

This game is enormous, and I could spend hundreds of words describing just the game. Instead, I'll sum it by saying this is a third person character RPG in a historical setting. Even though killing people isn't your only course of action, most missions are resolved with murder and there are four different power structures to be murdered: the Cult of Kosmos, a seemingly endless string of mercenaries, an arena full of champions, and the national leadership of the Greek states. This may sound like a lot and it is; each of those is a different tweak on the game.

The cult is hunted through finding clues, usually by killing other cultists, sometimes through sidequests. Hunting the cult is some of the most fun this game has and it ties deepest into the main plot. While most cultists are just a name, some are given personality and character, and there are some genuinely surprising reveals.

The mercenaries hunt you when you've committed crimes, usually murder, sometimes theft or destruction of property. They're an endless stream of difficult enemies with unique qualities ("takes less assassination damage", "has a wolf companion") in a way that sort of makes it like the Nemesis system in Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor, except this is far less fleshed out. It's one of the game's biggest missed opportunities. With any amount of personality ascribed to these mercenaries, it might have added something significant to the mindless murder, but instead it's just another long chain of bodies.

The arena, by comparison to the rest, is fairly simple; fight waves of enemies in an arena and then kill their champion boss. The fights aren't particularly different from what you do in the game world, but they do take place in an arena full of obstacles to avoid and exploit. There's a story to this arena that's worth seeing to the end, but that's about it.

The least fun of these are the nation takeovers. You have to first lower national threat levels by infiltrating forts and destroying supplies, stealing their war chest, and killing their leadership. Then you can take to the battlefield in a mass combat scenario that's a lot less fun than it sounds. It's just a lot of the same combat except with more enemies on screen, and most of them are occupied in fighting other nameless soldiers that are on your side, until one of the two nations wins. Your influence is in killing enemy captains and heroes, which are just the same enemies except with more hitpoints. If you were on the winning side, you get a big reward of gear. If you were on the losing side, you still get some gear. It ultimately does not matter whether Athens or Sparta controls a region, so it's really just another lost opportunity but maybe it's commentary on the game world.

I highlight these power structures because they're the vast majority of the game, and where it loses the most Assassin's Creed flavor. The focus of these power structures is mostly built on killing the people at the top, which is what you'd expect an assassin to do, but you're not playing an assassin. The word "assassin" might not ever be used in Assassin's Creed Odyssey. Where Origins reduced the functionality of the "single-button murder" that was a staple of the series, it's almost entirely removed in ACO. No longer does catching somebody by surprise and pressing the murder button kill them outright. For most non-fodder enemies, it only takes a large chunk off of their health. The satisfaction I derived from this game was looking out over an enemy infested fort, sneaking around to kill all of the fodder stealthily, and then getting the drop on the cultist, national leader, general I was there to kill and fighting them without backup because I killed all their backup. This is a formula Ubisoft has been building on since Far Cry 2. It's still fun, but Assassin's Creed used to make sneaking in and just killing that one target without engaging in mass murder feasible.

Another major change is the addition of dialog options. Sometimes, you can talk your way out of bad situations. None of these are influenced by your character's stats, which are solely focused on how easily you can kill someone, so the choice of dialog often feels like a guessing game. ACO doesn't pretend that these choices are particularly meaningful, except that at six points in the main plot they can influence which of the nine conclusions the story reaches. Even then, the results are largely the same but who comes to the end with you changes.

This is emblematic of ACO. It presents the illusion of choice, but there's really not much choice at all. Your choices don't have far reaching consequences for being a story largely centered around your character's special bloodline. The game world is wide open but it's a static thing. Killing one nation's leader just results in another filling in their place. Killing one mercenary moves you up the ladder, but another mercenary fills in behind you. Random name, random traits, no personality. The only murders that count are those against the Cult of Kosmos, but even half of those are just faceless people. I found two of the last ones just sitting alone in the woods. It seems that as Assassin's Creed has opened up the world over the course of the series, it has reduced the player's impact on it. Prior games were more linear affairs that could do things like jump 20 years in the future, or kill major characters and show the impacts of those deaths. In ACO, no one's death means anything. By the end of the game, my character's actions have had no meaningful impact on the game's world. Maybe it's a direct contradiction of the game's "chosen one" story, or maybe it's commentary on the meta narrative of the series, which is that all of this is largely meaningless because this world has been simulated to completion. Ancient aliens solved all of this long ago and humanity is just going through the motions. The ones who thought they could change things were wrong.

In this Assassin's Creed game, you are not an assassin, you're not part of a group of assassins, and you hardly assassinate anyone. In most aspects, this game and Origins before it are unlike any others in the series, and they benefit from it in some ways, but calling them "Assassin's Creed" is a misnomer. The game is still historical tourism, with appearances by famous Greeks such as Socrates, Leonidas, Herodotus, and Pericles, among others, but it's otherwise an entirely different animal from the series that came before Origins. I look back on the 70ish hours I've spent in the game, and I enjoyed my time playing it, but it's a sort of hollow enjoyment. This is a popcorn game, tasty but void of nutrition or substance.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10

Bonuses: +1 it's a huge, beautiful, open world full of things to do

Penalties: -2 you spend the whole game being told how important you are, but your actions don't make any meaningful impact on the game world

Nerd Coefficient: 6/10 (still enjoyable, but the flaws are hard to ignore)

MICROREVIEW [FILM]: THE PREDATOR BY SHANE BLACK (DIRECTOR) BRIAN



Mindless animal.

I know what it means when a child is a prominent character in a R rated action movie. In the opening 20 minutes of The Predator, we're introduced to Rory McKenna, a grade schooler on the autism spectrum and son of Army man Quinn McKenna, this film's protagonist. Can you guess why Rory is here? I groaned out loud, which is okay because I watched this from the comfort of my car at my local drive-in theater. It didn't get better.

The Predator is a sequel to the previous Predator and Alien vs. Predator movies, starting with a predator crash landing on Earth. After a brief encounter with the senior McKenna, it's captured by scientists while McKenna tries to escape with some alien equipment stolen from the crash site. McKenna is captured by the government and put with a group of other "crazy" military veterans, but the predator escapes and starts to track down the stolen gear, which McKenna had accidentally sent home and are now in the hands of his pre-teen child. McKenna enlists the help of his new friends and one of the surviving scientists to track down the predator and save his son, but none of them are ready for a second, even more dangerous predator that has also come to Earth.

I saw the trailers for this movie and it did not look good. I should have trusted my instincts. The gaggle of damaged military veterans are obviously made to emulate the special forces team of the first Predator, except they somehow have even less dimension to their

characters, and essentially no motivation to take on this suicide mission. McKenna's motivations are so incredibly weak as well, mostly correcting for a problem he caused for himself by stealing alien artifacts for seemingly no reason. But the worst of these are the motivations of the first predator that crash landed on Earth. Without spoiling the weak plot, the reason for why the first predator is on Earth to begin with is nonsense, especially in context of its actions. The only character that makes any sense whatsoever is the super predator but even its actions can't be reconciled with its motives at times. The ending is completely predictable, and how they get there requires so much hand waving and movie magic that it pulled me completely out of its fiction. This movie world does not make sense, and not in a whimsical way, just a thoughtless way. I cannot believe a single thought went into this script beyond the singular purpose of getting from one end of the movie to the other.

Even if it made sense, it's a bad action movie. For unknown reasons, the whole movie takes place at night (with a questionable amount of fast forwarding through time at the start), and nearly every scene is poorly lit. This is good for the predators though, because they don't seem to take much advantage of the benefits of being a predator, namely being able to hunt invisibly. You see so much of these predators that they may as well be slasher movie villains. This is Predator by way of Friday the 13th. No skilled hunters, just invincible killers brutally murdering anyone in the path of their (again, weak and nonsensical) mission until the plot dictates that they have to be defeated.

I don't hold any franchise sacred, but this is worse than just a bad popcorn action movie. It belongs in the gutters with Terminator 3, Terminator: Genesys, and Alien: Resurrection. This is a movie so bad that it should put the franchise on the shelf for a very long time. I don't want to see someone course-correct on this. Please, Fox/ Disney, put Predator away and let us forget this horrible outing.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 3/10

Bonuses: Nada

Penalties: -1 completely and utterly mindless in every manner

Nerd Coefficient: 2/10 (really really bad)

MICROREVIEW [TV SERIES]: LOST IN SPACE (2018) ZHAOYUN



Even the gorgeous visuals can't save this turd.

I remember watching Apollo 13 as a child. I wasn't impressed with the aesthetics, but recall thinking that while the cascade of near-fatal problems seemed a bit forced (at the time I had no idea it was based more or less closely on actual events!), the cast managed to pull it off and save the movie from the dustbin of (audiovisual) history. Sadly, Lost in Space suffers from the exact opposite issue. Watching it in Netflix's vaunted 4K resolution—with HDR enabled, no less—the visuals are absolutely stunning. But what stunned me even more is how incredibly insipid the narrative was. In honor of this atrocious series, welcome to the first episode of "Can you come up with a better story than a seventh-grader?" (It goes without saying that the writers for this show would spectacularly fail that test!)

First of all, the series suffers greatly due to its pointless "problem of the week" feel in each episode. I will spoil nothing when I say that each episode confronts the Robinsons with a crisis even more gratuitous or improbable than the last one. I think the main failing of the writing is simply that they were (too) obviously starting from the desired end-point (usually some sort of emotional realization, etc.) and then just throwing darts at the wall until they hit upon some convenient problem that forces precisely that end result. I have dubbed this the "crisis ex machina" effect: the perfect problem at just the right time which forces the character(s) to feel their feelings, and attempts (unsuccessfully for this viewer, needless to say !) to push the audience into melodramatic identification with the doggone unfairness of it all—poor Robinsons!

Just one example, sort of spoiler-free or at least spoiler-lite, will suffice to make this point. Once the robot (who despite the show's gorgeous visuals looks quite ridiculous, as it is all too obviously a guy in a suit for 90% of the shots-shame on you, producers, for cutting corners on such a key visual design!) bonds with Will, the villain must engineer a scenario in which the boy not only initially tries to hide the robot but, after it alternates-in response to his express commands!-between saving and injuring the other humans, forces it to take a long walk off a short pier (all of this, of course, is done in full view of the only nominally hidden villain). Yeah, the robot, an incredibly advanced alien life form, is forced off a cliff by a 12-year old's whim, cause that makes sense. This is so the villain can attempt a reset and thereby get a chance to be the robot's protectee. Since the writers obviously wanted to milk the melodrama of the shocking tables-have-turned moment when the villain comes out on top, they simply whipped up a bunch of crises, each more absurd than the last, which produce exactly that result. And I thought John Connor was annoying!

The writers also made a halfhearted attempt to circumvent some of the obvious objections their hopelessly contrived story-line might provoke in the minds of viewers. Why don't their various spacecraft just take off and go back to the mother ship? Apparently the writers had been watching Princess Bride and decided to manufacture a convenient methane-eating critter, seemingly stranding everyone on the planet for good.

An alternate source of fuel is found? Don't worry, the writers find a way to ruin that too, basically by manufacturing a stupid sense of looming crisis via the source's precarious location plus seismic activity, and then forcing a character to make a one-versus-many decision in the midst of—because why not?—a brand-new threat, steam geysers! Yet another alternative fuel source is located in a later episode? Well, that won't fill up 45 minutes, so better get some lame-looking bat thingies in there!

The cast is a bit uneven, too. While John and Maureen are well cast and as believable as anything/one else in this amateurish nonsense of a story, others left much to be desired. The villain, partly as a result of casting, was far from intimidating, but more than made up for that shortcoming by being absolutely no fun at all to watch. At times, this villain seemed to start poisonous rumors/ hit people in the head just "to watch the world burn", to quote Alfred, but lacked even the slightest glimmer of the Joker's manic psychopathy.

But the worst casting choice/performance was definitely Will. In fact, at first, I thought the worst problem with the show was simply the mediocre actor they'd found to play him, because the kid's performance managed to turn ostensibly the most innocent, likeable character into an infuriating nincompoop with an irritating habit of turning up his chin to look scared, turning up his chin to look brave, turning up his chin and scrunching up his eyes a little to look sad, and so on ad infinitum.

When the villain gets captured, not only does Will the rapscallion see fit to listen to the villain's absolutely ridiculous let-me-out ploy, he obligingly frees said villain despite the ploy not even making sense. It can be paraphrased thus: "I know someone who could do that dangerous thing instead of your father, and you really don't want him to leave you again, do you? Let me out right now (even though your father has literally already left!) and I totally won't tie you up or anything!" Never have I so thoroughly rooted against the 'good guy' in a story before, and I initially blamed it all on the actor. But halfway through, I was forced to reevaluate. It's the writers who should shoulder the responsibility for this hot mess. Sure, the actor may be unimpressive, but oh, the contrived nonsense they keep writing for him to stumble into-it's enough to make one scream!

Near the end of the series, Will is in grievous danger with seemingly no hope left, and I suppose the audience was meant to stare helplessly at the screen, desperately wishing for the impossible to happen and for him to be rescued. I hope you, dear reader, won't think less of me if I admit that I was entirely on the other side, praying fervently that the writers would finally have the courage to kill him off! I trust you won't consider the series spoiled if I reveal that, to my everlasting sorrow, the annoying Robinson family will be stinking up our TVs with a second season if the cliffhanger ending is any indication. Would that they all hurled themselves off a cliff instead!

TL, DR: this series suuuuuucks. Give it a miss, and go back to the source: Swiss Family Robinson! (The title of the show should never have been Lost in Space, anyway—it should have been Space Family Robinson!)

The Math:

Objective assessment: 5/10

Bonuses: +2 for truly breathtaking visual aesthetics in crisp 4K+HDR

Penalties: too many to count, but I'll try: -1 for Will being such an idiot, -1 for the crisis ex machina nonsense, -1 for absolutely terrible end-focused narrative writing, -1 for reducing Smith (the villain) to a mere poison-tongued rumor starter, etc., etc.

Nerd coefficient: 3/10 "Danger, potential viewer!"



SIDE QUESTS: SYNTHESIZERS, A LOVE STORY

THE G

Today's episode of SIDE QUESTS is more than a little personal. That's right, it's about my favorite inanimate objects: synthesizers!



What Are We Talking About?

A synthesizer is an electronic instrument that produces sound waves. The earliest and basic method is called analog subtractive synthesis. An oscillator produces sine, square and/or sawtooth waves with electrical current. A filter and envelope generator then cut into, or subtracts from, the waveform to alter the sound. With the advent of digital synthesis in the late 1970s, new forms of synthesis became possible, including wavetable, FM (frequency modulation) and S&S (sample and synthesis).

The synthesizer has actually been around since the 1930s, but didn't really catch on until Bob Moog's voltage-controlled synthesizers made their way into studios in the late 1960s, and onto albums by Simon & Garfunkel, The Beatles and The Monkees. By the mid-1970s, synthesizers were a thing, though it wasn't until the 1980s that they threatened to displace the sainted guitar.

Nowadays you hear far more music made with synthesizers -- or samples of synthesizers -- than with guitars. That's a sad fact if you're the kind of person who yells at clouds and hates Millennials because they love avocado toast and refuse to spend money on Budweiser or Applebee's. For someone like me, it's bittersweet. I love the synthesizer, and am proud of its ascendance to the pinnacle of music making; but I love the guitar too.

The Rabbit Hole

So, basically I've been obsessed for as long as I can remember. Why? Because, in their purest form, synthesizers don't sound like anything you make with strings, reeds or stretched out skin. They sound like the future. They still sound like the future, even though now it's more often the future we dreamed of in the past.

I don't know how it started. I certainly didn't get it from my parents: my dad mostly listens to classical music and a smattering of rock and folk, while my mom refers to all music as "noise." But my dad did have the Vangelis album Spiral on vinyl--in retrospect, that was probably ground zero.

Flash-forward to 1983. We were just getting music videos at that time--not on MTV (no cable), but on weekly shows that came on just after the news. If I was lucky enough, I could watch half before my parents shut the TV off and told me to get ready for bed. Those shows played a bit of everything, but the only songs I remember were the ones with killer synth lines, like "Jump" and "The Message."

The school I went to had a really strong music program, and in the music room, they had a Casio CZ-5000 and a Roland Juno 106. Whenever possible, I'd sneak in early and move the knobs and sliders around. I didn't know what I was doing -- I was just a dumb kid. Most of the time, I ended up playing the bass line from "Blue Monday" on the Juno, or some Flock of Seagulls chords on the Casio.

In 1991, I finally convinced my parents to go halfsies on a Roland D-50. My keyboard teacher, Carl, assured me it was the "best one in the biz," and that his guy could get me an unbeatable price. I adored Carl, who was an old timer from the northside of town--an area mostly known for red sauce joints and organized crime. So I mowed lawns and shoveled sidewalks until I'd earned half.

Now, \$500 in 1991 was a lot, but it wasn't a lot for a new Roland D-50. Looking back, I've often wondered if my synth just fell off the back of the truck, as they used to say. More likely, Carl's guy just wanted to liquidate stock. After all, by 1990 the D-50 was out of production and had been emphatically replaced by the mighty Korg M1.

The Roland D-50 used something called Linear Arithmetic (LA) synthesis, which was proprietary speak for "sample and synthesis" (S&S). What that means is that the D-50 paired the attack transient from 8-bit samples (think the precise moment a trumpet blares or a mallet hits a xylophone) with the decay, sustain and release from a synthetic waveform (think everything that comes after that moment). It sounded otherworldly--and in fact, you'll recognize the D-50 from basically every late '80s New Age cliche ever. Perhaps the most iconic use of the D-50 was on Enya's 1998 song "Orinoco Flow," which used the Pizzicato Strings patch.

Unfortunately for young teenage me, the D-50 was also brutally difficult to program. Unlike the Juno 106 we had at school, you had to go menu diving to make anything happen--there was nary a slider or knob in sight. But I didn't care--I had my first synth.

The Music of Futures Past

By the mid-1990s I'd discovered techno, house and ambient music. This wasn't music featuring some electronic instrumentation; it was all electronic instrumentation. I did like some sample-based house music, but by and large I gravitated towards the stuff that sounded like science fiction expressed musically.

A lot was made with really cheap gear that had been repurposed from its original intention. For example, the Roland TB-303 Bass Line--a cheap-looking plastic box with a single oscillator designed to provide accompaniment for practicing guitarists. It didn't sound much like a bass guitar, and was kind of a pain to program. But it did have this wonderfully squelchy filter and a characterful way of tie-ing notes together. In 1987, a producer from the South Side of Chicago named DJ Pierre discovered that sweeping the filter along short patterns created an irresistible hypnotic effect. Techno producers from Detroit (and, later, New York, Canada and Europe) achieved a similar effect with other synths, including the same ones I'd used from school--the Roland Juno 106 and the Casio CZ-1000. I can think of no better vision of the future, as seen from 1997, than "Organa" by Dutch producer Steve Rachmad.

I started making my own techno in 1996, though I never really finished anything. I had a mental block -- a fear of failure, I think. Basically, if I never finished anything, then I never had to experience the pain of rejection. So I'd muck around, make loops and then fuck off for a few months at a time. Looking back, I regret that I wasn't more serious and driven from the get-go.

That changed in 2015, when I discovered synthwave. Actually, I already knew Kavinsky and College, who are widely credited with inspiring the genre. But I didn't realize there was this whole scene of people inspired by magenta-tinted '80s retrofuturism.

That changed soon after we began our series Cyberpunk Revisited. I was re-reading Neuromancer, Mindplayers, Software, etc. and I wanted to find something that captured the mood in musical terms. I found a couple cyberpunk playlists on Spotify and immediately got shoved down the rabbit hole. Makeup and Vanity Set, Perturbator, Miami Nights 1984...I couldn't get enough. I was hooked.

Slowly but surely I got back into making music, and found that--with kids and far less free time--I suddenly had the drive and discipline that had been missing during my 20s and early 30s. I started finishing songs, decorating them in lush, lovely synth tones--I even released some of them. And then made an album!

Synthesizers: The Greatest Thing on Earth

But enough about me--let's talk synths. There are many kinds of synthesis, but I'm mainly into subtractive--the studio sound of the late '70s and early '80s, and the underground sound of the late '80s and early '90s. One of my all-time favorites is, of course the Roland Juno 106. Released in 1984, was basically the older Juno 60 only with MIDI (which allows electronic instruments to communicate with one another) but no arpeggiator.

The 106 features a single digitally-controlled analog oscillator (DCF), which means it produces sound via electrical current but also features an electronic pulse that keeps the oscillator in tune. It has a single digitally-controlled filter (DCF), a single envelope generator, which modulates both amplitude and the frequency cutoff on the DCF, and a single low-frequency oscillator (LFO), which can modulate either pitch, pulse width or the filter cutoff. The 106 also has a silky smooth chorus effect that makes everything sound like gold. So while the 106 has a more limited feature set than some of the other synths I'll talk about, it's almost impossible to make a bad sounding patch with it. It has been called, rightly in my view, the ultimate beginner's synth. And boy does it sound lovely...

Next up is the Oberheim OB-8. Released in 1983, the OB-8 replaced the more famous OB-Xa (made famous in "Jump"). For my money, however, the OB-8 is the

best of the bunch. It featured two voltage-controlled analog oscillators (VCOs) per voice, with 8 total voices of polyphony, a Curtis ladder-design voltage-controlled filter (VCF), two envelopes and a whole junk ton of LFO modulation capabilities. You can also pan individual voices across the stereo field (i.e. left to right speaker), leading to some seriously out there stuff.

The last hardware synth I'll present for you is brand new, the Korg Prologue. It's not out yet, but I've had the pleasure of playing one in the shop--and let me tell you, it is mighty fine. The Prologue features a pair of VCOs, a VCF and two envelope generators, but also has a digital multi-oscillator that can do simple FM or wavetable synthesis. What that means is that you can do classic analog, '80s digital or more complex patches that blend the two.

Of course, one of the great things about being alive today is how cheap, convenient and good software synthesizers have become. Some are truly excellent, like Diva by Germany's u-He: a synth that lets you mix and match modules emulated from various classic pieces of kit. It can even simulate the character analog synthesizers pick up as they age...bad tuning and oscillator drift! Here are a couple videos made by my favorite sound designer for Diva (and now friend), Swan Audio. The first is a synthwave track using sounds be made for the preset pack Analog Hits, and the second are his OB-8 recreations, which sound amazingly realistic if you ask me.

Well, that about wraps it up! But just for good measure, here are a couple love songs I've written to the synthesizer. Enjoy!

A YOUNG WRITER REMEMBERS URSULA K. LE GUIN PHOEBE WAGNER

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On Tuesday, I nerded out to my undergraduate Worldbuilding Workshop about how The Dispossessed changed my life—from my thoughts on anarchism to gender to love. A few hours later, I read the New York Times article about the passing of Ursula K. Le Guin at the age of 88. I've never been one to feel sad over the passing of people I didn't personally know, so when I came home and started chatting with writer friends about Le Guin's work, the melancholic feeling surprised me. I wanted to write about it. So many others have better and more words to devote to one of the greatest contemporary writers, but I am grateful to Ursula K. Le Guin because she gave me hope and freedom and fresh eyes.

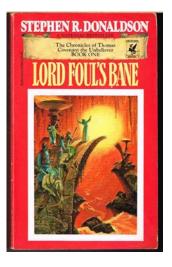
I came to Le Guin's work late compared to many. The video of her acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters was the first time I truly encountered her. A senior in college feeling insecure about writing fantasy, I felt grateful she acknowledged the honor but also acknowledged how genre writers had been slighted for so long: "I rejoice in accepting it and sharing it with all the writers who were excluded from literature for so long . . . who for the last fifty years watched the beautiful awards go to the so-called 'realists.'"

A few years later, I entered an MFA program populated by folks whose idea of engaging with speculative fiction was trying to comprehend Harry Potter. I was also newly married, and my husband had six or seven of Le Guin's books. Discouraged, again, about writing science fiction and fantasy, I started reading The Left Hand of Darkness, which shattered what I thought a science fiction novel could be, how gender could be portrayed, how an invented world could shape my worldview. More importantly, it changed how I encountered gender on a daily basis—one of the most empathy-producing moments in my life to date. As I closed the covers and promptly fell into a book hangover, I couldn't understand why none of my professors had taught Le Guin or pushed one of her books into my hands. Yes, folks had suggested her, but one book deep into her work, and I'd found a complex thinker, writer, reader, teacher all rolled into one.

In a few weeks, I start co-teaching an undergraduate seminar on Le Guin's work. We will focus on The Dispossessed, a book about utopia and anarchism, and are already channeling our inner-Ursula by requesting students avoid buying their books from Amazon or other large retailers. I don't know if any will listen. My co-teacher and I both read The Dispossessed this past year, when it could not feel more timely. Each page, I thought yes, this, this, thank you for putting words to this.

I am grateful to Ursula K. Le Guin because she changed me. I only met her on the page, but I encountered a spirit I wanted to know. While her intelligence and thoughtfulness come clearly through each paragraph, it's her ability to question her mindset and beliefs I hope to continue emulating even as her books continue to change me.

THE FUGUE OF FANTASY AND THE GRIMDARK INTERREGNUM PAUL WEIMER



Grimdark has been around since the 1990's. Is it really all that new? And is it here to stay? I think aloud about the currently dominant mode of Epic Fantasy being published today.

There have been tendencies and trends in epic fantasy fiction ever since it became a mass market genre in it's own right in the 1970's. Waves of authors have come into the subgenre, falling into various schools of thought. While it is Science Fiction that is the literature that emphasizes the "genre conversation", with books reacting and responding directly to each other, in fantasy it is somewhat different.

The fantasy genres, and subgenres like epic fantasy are more like a fugue. A fugue is a type of classical music composition which is composed of various musical melodies which appear in the course of the piece, and get emphasized, deemphasized, changed, and otherwise are in dialogue with each other in the overall composition. The fantasy genre can be thought of as an complex fugue, with various voices rising, falling and reacting to each other as the music of fantasy progresses over the years. The music of Fantasy continues on and on, even as the voices change.

In the history of epic fantasy, following this analogy and paradigm, there has always been a voice in a minor key, a strain of fantasy with antiheroes, shades of dark grey and darkness, worlds where hope and optimism are not valued or are even punished. Violence is the name of the game, dystopic amorality the norm and the worlds are often the successor states or the ruins of another, brighter time. The classical Western European model of the first few centuries after Rome fell is the historical ur-model, and indeed, many novels use thinly disguised or even explicitly set in that time period. The latest iteration of this minor-key fantasy, which had in recent years become a dominant theme in epic fantasy, is what we call Grimdark.

Grimdark and its earlier iterations of dark fantasy first arose in the late 1970's with Lord Foul's Bane, by Stephen Donaldson. Lord Foul Bane's featured a thoroughly unlikeable protagonist (who commits a rape against an innocent girl), a fantasy world under threat, and a definite reaction to the Tolkenian model of epic fantasy. That model, at the same time, was being voiced by books that explicitly were replications of that model, such as Sword of Shannara. That voice, and more particularly the grimdark voice in the fugue of fantasy both gave way to an optimistic strain of epic fantasy. Authors like David Eddings, Judith Tarr, Raymond Feist and Margaret Weis defined epic fantasy for over a decade, ringing changes and variations on that voice in the fugue. In the 1980's and early 90's, this could be seen as a reaction to Reaganism, Thatcherism, the last gasps of the Cold War, and other such political strains in the Western World.

This is not to say that there was no strains of the darker material. Just as a voice in a fugue can go quiet but not silent, authors like Glen Cook and Michael Moorcock continued the dark theme that would become grimdark in later years. There has always been that dark theme, even when fantasy has been dominated by the more optimistic theme.

In the 90's, external politics changed, a relative period of peace and calm in the Western World came to the fore. The "end of history" was bandied about. The Wall had fallen, the United States was considered to be the only superpower in the world. It was in this environment that Dark epic fantasy rose again in series like Martin's A Game of Thrones and Kate Elliott's Crown of Starsseries. In the early 2000's, authors like Joe Abercrombie, R Scott Bakker and Steven Erikson took up this mantle and created the modern Grimdark voice in Epic Fantasy, although it was not called that at first. Grimdark as a term was a word borrowed from the dark space fantasy universe of Warhammer 40000, around 2008 ,and applied to the dark fantasy being written. Even before it was formally named as such, though, Grimdark became the dominant strain in epic fantasy. The epic fantasy bookshelves became as dominated with dark antiheroes and terrible amoral worlds. Press releases from publishers breathlessly would tell of how dark and gritty the newest grimdark was, just how gritty and dark the newest generation, the newest author was. Modern publishing releases combined with this dominant strange in the fantasy fugue to create an arms race of books exploring this theme.

I call this the Grimdark Interregnum.

Grimdark was not just limited to fantasy novels, either. A parallel descent into dark and gritty themes in comic books occurred in the late 1980's and 1990's as well, suggesting that the external social and societal pressures affected both mediums. The idea of "fridging" female characters was first made manifest, for example, in a 1994 Green Lantern comic strip.

Mixed in with it's realism and focus on amoral anti hero protagonists, however, it must be said, that a lot of Grimdark featured elements that fantasy today is reacting to--issues of misogyny, erasure of women authors and representation of diverse characters. It is not unreasonable, to my view, to see a lot of , but not all, grimdark fantasy as appealing to a single demographic: young white men. Given that the majority of readers, including fantasy readers, are women, this has turned out to be an inherently self-limiting practice.

And with that increasing awareness and attempts to address these issues, as well as a reaction to the current politics, climate change and other world problems extant today, the environment in which authors are writing in has once again changed. Grimdark is no longer quite a dark mirror for our times, and no longer needs to, or perhaps should be, the dominant theme. And given the slow cargo ship turn that is the publishing world, things are changing, but only gradually.

But after years in the ascendancy, I think that Grimdark wave is starting to recede, and new forms are coming forward. I am seeing more and more novels being described as hopeful (or even hopeful grimdark, which sounded weird the first time I heard the phrase, but not the second or third).. I attended a panel at 4th Street Fantasy which discussed Hopepunk, a term coined by Alexandra Rowland, as a reaction to Grimdark.

If one wants a visual representation of this, compare how well the DC movies, very much in a Grimdark mode have been reacted to as compared to Marvel movies, especially movies like the Guardians of the Galaxy and Black Panther. The latter movie is most definitely Hopepunk. It's what characters do with their agency, their power in a sometimes very dark world. Trying to build something better, on small or large scale, IS a hopeful act.

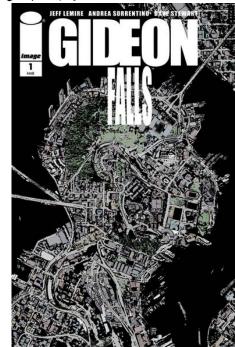
But make no mistake. Grimdark and dark fantasy

are not going away, or going to go away. II do not see a return to 80's style fantasy, either. I do think I hear a new voice in the fugue, one where the worlds may still be dark and gritty, or have elements of same, and yet the stories are not of antiheroes, nihilistic and brooding and without optimism. The green shoots of hope can now be seen. Even dark characters can find redemption and change. The lessons learned during the Grimdark Interregnum, in the exploration of that theme in the fugue, is producing a new voice in the fugue.

Will this newest trend hold and grow to dominate epic fantasy? We shall read and see.

THURSDAY MORNING SUPERHERO: YEAR IN REVIEW





As we rapidly approach the new year it dawns on me that I may not have many more Thursday Morning Superhero posts in 2018. While it is a bit cliche to post an end of the year list, it is also valuable to reflect on what 2018 gifted us and see what will keep us excited reading into the new year. Attempting to narrow down your favorite books into a concise list is always a struggle, but here are the five books that had the biggest impact on me personally in 2018. They may not be the best books of 2018 and are presented in no particular order.

Gideon Falls by Jeff Lemire:

Inspired by Twin Peaks and a series that is being adapted for TV, Gideon Falls is a book that presents two stories that will at some point come to a head. One story is about Father Fred, a new priest who has arrived in Gideon Falls after the current priest recently passed away. The other follows a young man who is currently dealing with mental health issues that have him recovering hidden pieced of a mysterious Black Barn throughout town. Norton and Fred could not be more diametrically opposed characters who are seeking a greater understanding in this mysterious town. I have always been endeared the horror genre in comics and have always been drawn into the characters that Lemire creates. At one point I almost had his phenomenal hockey story Essex County on my syllabus as required reading in a sport management class. The dichotomy of rural and urban play is extremely effective and artist Andrea Sorrentino really brings this series to life. I cannot wait to see what 2019 has in store for the town of Gideon Falls.

Daredevil by Charles Soule:

I started to fall in love with the Man without Fear during Mark Waid's run on the series starting in 2011. The series has had its ups and downs as most ongoing books do, but Soule's run in 2018 brought Matt Murdock back to his roots in Hell's Kitchen. In addition to finding a way to put the rabbit back in the hat in terms of everyone knowing his secret identity, Soule was able to focus on the relationships that are surrounding Murdock and how his decisions impact those he loves. I also enjoyed the current arc that is eerily similar to the situation in White House. As someone who is a bit of a news junkie, I enjoyed the balance between Murdock attempting to work with and investigate Kingpin at the same time. I am not sure where his run will end up in the big picture, but it reinvigorated my love for Daredevil and has me excited about the passing of the torch in 2019.

Babyteeth by Donny Cates:

As I mentioned earlier, I have a soft spot for horror books and an even softer spot for young parents. When I learned that Cates was writing a book that centered around the birth of the Anti-Christ and the impact it had on its young mother. I wasn't prepared for the world building that Cates would bring and how emotionally connected I would be drawn to Sadie. Her struggle with her own family and dealing with her child resonated with me in a profound way. It is a book that can be difficult to read at some points, in a good way, and a series that I highly recommend. After the recent trip into the Red Realm and what this means for Sadie, her child, and her family I am anxiously awaiting this book to return in 2019.

Darth Vader by Charles Soule:

Soule returns on my list for penning my favorite Star Wars book since Marvel regained the rights. I probably sound like a broken record, but Soule's ability to make Vader a truly menacing villain and showcase his incredible power in the Force has brought me a new found respect for Vader. It is consistently the best Star Wars book on the market and spawned a phenomenal spinoff in Doctor Aphra which nearly made the cut for this list. There are so many memorable moments including using mind control on a giant squid in issue #15 and the sheer terror he invokes in the Inquisitors. The arc that brought Vader under water to deal with the Mon Cala was particularly memorable. Since we don't have a new Star Wars movie this Christmas I am very much looking forward to reading new Star Wars material in 2019.

Dept. H by Matt and Sharlene Kindt:

This underwater whodunit from a duo of Kindts came to a fitting conclusion in 2018. It all began when Mia had to journey to an underwater research base after her father was murdered. While the premise the drove the series was attempting to solve who murdered her father, the heart of the book was Mia coming to terms with the relationship she had with her father. We learned about this through a series of flashbacks that really set the tone of the book. In addition to the murder mystery there was extra suspense as it related to a potential pandemic associated with a virus that was working its way towards the surface. Matt and Sharlene's art on this book really added to the tone and the design of the underwater contraptions was a highlight throughout this series. I started appreciating Matt's watercolor technique in Mind MGMT and was thrilled to see a similar style that really added to the mystery. Definitely a book that deserves the deluxe trade paperback treatment and one you should all consider gifting to your comic reading loved ones.

ECO-SPECULATION #2 ANIMALS AMONG US PHOEBE WAGNER

OVER 20 MILLION COPIES SOLDI REDEVALUE Martin the Warrior BRIAN JACQUES

Environmental fiction is often bracketed into a narrow shelf. The Kim Stanley Robinsons and Jeff Vandermeers and a few Atwoods. The best books maintain elements of "fun" reading, like The Southern Reach Trilogy but in general these books have a #message. Otherwise, why would we call them environmental?

I'd like to challenge such an idea. On the academic and activist sides of the environmentalists, intersectionality is the hot word. Is Flint, Michigan, an environmental issue? Yes. Does the situation also contain issues of race and class? Yes. As the intersections of environmental issues continue to grow, I wonder if we will reimagine old texts as more environmental than we thought. For example, Tolkien is not usually placed on the environmental shelf beside Vandermeer, but how can he not be seen as an environmental writer, especially when one gets to the know the man who could spend half an hour looking at a flower?

Speculative literature has long been lauded for its ability to produce empathy since so much of the genre is about understanding other places/people/races/species/ whatever. In particular, I wonder about the impact of the genre's inclusion of animals and nonhuman beings as a common element in speculative literature.

There's no perfect word for referring to other-than-humans. For the purpose of this column, I'll use nonhuman, which I still find way too human centric, but it's common in academic fields as well as the speculative side of things. What is a nonhuman, you ask? Usually another other living thing, though "living" is pretty broad. For example, a tree can be nonhuman (take Ents, for example). But so can a mountain or a river.

In the discussion of nonhuman beings, one is often discouraged from projecting human characteristics on them. I heard this a lot in my writing workshops at my environmental MFA. If you give a river emotion, you are forcing it into the box of human understanding. This distinction will become more developed as new writers come into speculative literature, but I wonder about evaluating older literature with this set of rules. Humans are animals, after all. The human body is a type of biome, much like a mountain.

When I look back on my road to environmentalism, the books that impacted my thinking often contained anthropomorphic beings. In particular, the Redwall series sticks out from the shadows of childhood. Written by Brian Jacques, the series spans twenty books. While not clearly chronological, they can be read in certain orders to tease out repeating characters. The novels revolve around several enduring places rather than characters or plots-Redwall Abbey, Salamandastron, and Mossflower Woods. The beings that populate these places are mice, moles, hedgehogs, shrews, hares, badgers, otters, rats, owls, snakes, etc. They carry swords, wear habits, cook scones, and fight wars. For the most part, they are explicitly human with one key difference-they rarely subjugate other animals (example, riding a horse). It does happen (book one, Redwall, contains the most specific instance with the villain whipping a horse), but animal subjugation is less often than in such a text as Wind in the Willows.

Today, animal studies theorists and environmental writers would most likely raise an eyebrow at claiming Brian Jacques as an environmental writer. For me, it comes back to empathy. These stories made me see a mouse as something worthy of respect. One could argue that the respect grew out of the human attributes rather than the animal aspects, but I can't help but feel it something more. That respect for these creatures as having worlds of their own (even if it was their humanity appealing to me as a child) created a foundation I've built on since then.

It is fantasy, after all. Should we continue to explore new ways to respect nonhumans through our human storytelling—yes, but I wonder at the power of giving animals humanity in the eyes of a child, to give rich lives to the animals a child recognizes as "pests," such as a mouse. I'll leave you with this quote from Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-stories:" "We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves. This recovery [fantasy]-stories help us to make. In that sense only a taste for them may make us, or keep us, childish."

WESTWORLD WEDNESDAY: SOME PEOPLE'S CHILDREN DEAN E.S. RICHARD

WESTWORLD

Welcome back to Westworld Wednesday, a series of essays/ramblings about the themes & philosophies of Westworld. NOTE: while we deal more with themes here, rather than plot, the emphasis is not on what happened this week; HOWEVER, if you are reading this and wish to avoid spoilers, you should be current on the show (Seriously, there are spoilers in this).

No family is perfect. Hopefully makes you feel better about your family, because these people take the normal, everyday idiosyncrasies that make Thanksgiving slightly awkward and dials it up to 11.

There has been a theory making the rounds since William didn't murder Lawrence and his family (this time) that this is a sign of good in him. While he is definitely a complex character, Vanishing Point put any thoughts of that to rest, along with his wife and daughter. It's that wife, the un-subtly named Juliet, and their daughter Emily, that I want to talk about.

Juliet, though never seen in the flesh in Season One, appears in a photo that drives much of the plot. We see the bookend to Vanishing Point, the beginnings of William's detachment from the real world, and from Juliet, before he even marries her. The start of the darkness within him, reflected in the change in his headwear in Season One. In Season Two, we do see glimpses of good, but that's really all they are - a small amount of light shining through the cracks.

But if Westworld is all about living out fantasy without consequence, if the Hosts are really just unfeeling robots, are his actions that bad? That's the question at the heart of the character; he visits violence and evil on things put there for that express purpose, so are they really evil?

But let's step back here, because Vanishing Point

does something that a lot of fiction does, that is a sort of played-out evil. The dead wife/mother/child of our straight, white, male protagonist (SWMP), her death serving as his motivation and reason he is generally surly, with lots of demons in his tortured soul. Granted, there's a reason this gets used a lot- seeing/having your family murdered/dead of cancer/whatever would definitely mess me up, and I am already grouchy most of the time. But seriously, fiction is full of dead families in the service of backstory.

Juliet is dead, more or less from the get-go (although time is pretty subjective in the show), and the reveal of her death comes before we actually know it was her, just that he had the run-of-the-mill Dead Wife Backstory (DWB). Eventually, we find that it is the very same woman from the photo, the one William fell in love with, then subsequently out of love with in favor of Delores, yet married after his transformation in order to get deeper into the Delos Corporation. Still a DWB, but at least it has some depth to it.

I wonder if it was by design, or if they retconned it in Season Two (Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan never invite me to their parties), but it's given added depth by the exploration of what lead to her suicide, alongside the reappearance (for William) of his daughter. This is the part of the DWB where some new damsel in distress needs the SWMP to emerge from his gloom and save her, after which they live happily ever after, or something.

Only Emily is no damsel in distress, but rather, her quest is to get her father to face some manner of justice for what he truly is. There is no redemption arc here, no breaking William from his shell. Just him answering the question of if what he did in fantasy mattered in reality, as he grasp on reality is either severed or ignored.

So if you are going to off a family in the service of story, make it really matter to the story.

It would be really nice if I could end it there, and say Westworld nails it and breaks the mold of so many pieces of entertainment that slaughter women and kids for backstory, but we spent a really big part of Season One with Arnold/Bernard's family having been killed offscreen. Maeve both experiences her daughter dying, dying alongside her (at the hands of William), AND has her daughter being actually alive. Lawrence ultimately awakens and tries to kill William because William killed his family (at least once).

Maybe in the ever-increasing body count of Westworld it doesn't matter; it's not even ineffective. At least it all serves to paint the picture of the Man in Black as evil and twisted, rather than a brooding anti-hero. So next time you're annoyed with your family, just be glad they weren't killed off in the service of your backstory.