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Susan Simensky Bietila

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Hyperbolic Futures: Speculative Finance and Speculative Fiction

Essay by Steven Shaviro

“I’d say a practicing free market economist has blood on his hands, or he isn’t doing his job properly. It comes with the market, and the decisions it demands. Hard decisions, decisions of life and death.” So says Mike Bryant, a finance-company executive in Richard K. Morgan’s near-future thriller, *Market Forces* (2005). The tone of Bryant’s utterance—on a financial news-and-commentary TV program, no less—is pitch-perfect. It has a kind of blunt, empirical directness, as if to say: I’m giving it to you straight, no alibis, no evasions. It may not look pretty, but the world is a harsh and cruel place. Tough decisions—pragmatic and realistic, free of illusions—have to be made, one way or another. If you don’t have blood on your hands, you are just an ineffectual dreamer, out of touch with the world as it actually is.

I think this is a tone that we are all familiar with; we hear it often, coming from politicians and financiers alike. It’s all there in Morgan’s novel, with the rhetoric ramped up just a little bit: the appeal to a hard-nosed “realism”; the contemptuous dismissal of idle dreams; the cynical justification of rapaciousness as sheer necessity. Of course, all these are alibis for a system of well-nigh universal expropriation and extortion. Anglo-American politics today is founded on the premise that vigorous market competition is the best way to solve all problems. *Market Forces* simply takes this notion at its word. The novel depicts a neoliberal, free-market society, characterized by violence and aggression on all levels. In the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes argued that a strong State was needed in order to suppress an otherwise unending “war of all against all.” But in the twenty-first century, Morgan suggests, our philosophy is very nearly the reverse. Now, the important thing is to incite and promote competition, to make sure that a “war of all against all” takes place, no matter what. As Michel Foucault remarked, for the neoliberalism of today “competition is not a primitive given.” Rather, it is an ideal, a desideratum: something that has

to be “carefully and artificially constructed” through a series of “lengthy efforts.” In the terms of Morgan’s novel, we need to impose “conflict incentives,” in order to force people to work at their highest potential. In *Market Forces*, the vast majority of the population lives in violence-ridden squalor behind barbed-wire fences, sequestered in so-called “cordoned zones.” Meanwhile, members of the corporate elite compete for contracts and promotions through *Mad Max*-style road rage duels to the death. It is simply “realistic”—a “hard-edged solution for hard-edged times”—to make life-and-death decisions that can only be enforced and justified through competitive struggle. Under the harsh discipline of the market, morals are an unaffordable luxury. Even the slightest weakness or hesitation is immediately punished.

In the world of *Market Forces*, the hottest field in finance is Conflict Investment, which funds civil wars and rebellions in “developing” countries in return for extravagant profits (from kickbacks, interest payments, and the control of factories in tax-free “enterprise zones”) if the side you are backing wins. The rationale for this is entirely market-based. “Human beings have been fighting wars as long as history recalls,” another finance executive tells us in the course of the novel. “It is in our nature, it is in our genes. In the last half of the last century the peacemakers, the *governments* of this world, did not end war. They simply *managed* it, and they managed it *badly*. They poured money, without thought of return, into conflicts and guerrilla armies abroad... They were partisan, dogmatic, and inefficient. Billions wasted in poorly assessed wars that no sane investor would have looked at twice.” But what governments did poorly, the market can do better. When faced with a rebellion in a poor country, a Conflict Investment manager says, “we are concerned with only two things. Will they win? And will it pay? ... We do not judge. We do not moralize. We do not waste. Instead, we assess, we invest. And we prosper.”

[*Market Forces*] depicts a neoliberal, free-market society, characterized by violence and aggression on all levels.

Under the harsh discipline of the market, morals are an unaffordable luxury. Even the slightest weakness or hesitation is immediately punished.

Cont. on p. 4



Hyperbolic Futures (cont. from p. 3)

Both in its large-scale world-building and in its small-scale attention to the particular ways in which social and technical innovations affect our lives, science fiction comes to grips with abstractions like economies, social formations, technological infrastructures, and climate perturbations.

Market Forces is a work of futurist science fiction, but it's not that much of an extrapolation from present-day actuality. It simply makes overt what is already starting to happen. The novel seizes upon incipient tendencies and emerging patterns in the world today and imagines them pushed to their ultimate consequences. Already today, even the core security activities of the state, like war, espionage, and prisons, are increasingly being outsourced and privatized. Speculative financial firms make their profits wherever they can find opportunities for arbitrage and market manipulation. They accumulate vast sums by developing ever-more-exotic financial instruments and by shuffling money around the globe in milliseconds. If the budgets and currencies of entire countries are destroyed in the process, then so be it. Financial firms "do not moralize"; they just "invest" and "prosper." Ordinary people are caught in the crossfire of this manic financial competition, losing their jobs, their homes, and sometimes their lives; but this is just unfortunate collateral damage. We can no more prevent it—or so we are told—than we can prevent hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and other natural disasters.

Of course, all speculation involves an element of risk; there are times when the financial house of cards collapses—as it did, most notably, in 2008. But in that case, the State does the one thing that it is still good for: it props up the financial firms and the rich people who invest in them with massive infusions of cash and transfers of wealth. This leads, inevitably, to an enormous budget deficit, which the State then claims can only be rectified by "austerity" programs and new waves of privatization, justified as usual in the name of "realism," telling its citizens that we simply cannot afford education, or sanitation, or retirement benefits, any longer. And so the banks and investment firms get flush once again, and the cycle of financial speculation begins anew. The financial executives in *Market Forces* are positively proud of having survived the "domino recessions" and consequent political instabilities of the early twenty-first century: "A few riots, a few banks out of business, that nuclear nonsense in the Punjab. We surfed it, Chris. We rode it out. It was *easy*."

Science fiction is one of the best tools we have for making sense of hyperbolic situations like these. Both in its large-scale world-building and in its small-scale attention to the particular ways in which social and technical innovations affect our lives, science fiction comes to grips with abstractions like economies, social formations, technological infrastructures, and climate perturbations. These are what the ecocritic Timothy Morton calls *hyperobjects*: entities that are perfectly real in and of themselves, but that are so out of scale with regard to our immediate experience that we find them almost impossible to grasp. The effects of hyperobjects are so massive, and so widely distributed across time and space, that we cannot apprehend them directly. We never experience any particular moment as the one in which climate change, or technological change, actually *happens*. Either these changes are incipient, just on the verge of happening, or else they have happened already, before we were able to notice. Global capitalism, like global warming, is altogether actual, and yet oddly impalpable: its traces are everywhere, and yet it is never before us as a whole at any given moment or in any given place. A hyperobject lies so far beyond the limits of our senses that it cannot be understood intuitively, but only abstractly. We may model such an object mathematically and computationally; or else we may encapsulate it in the form of a story. One of the great virtues of science fiction in particular is that it works as a kind of focusing device, allowing us to feel the effects of these hyperobjects—of digital technology, or capitalism, or climate change—intimately and viscerally, on a human and personal scale, contained within the boundaries of a finite narrative. Science fiction is, among other things, a form of psycho-socio-technological cartography. It engages in the process of what theorists have called "cognitive mapping" (Fredric Jameson) and "affective mapping" (Jonathan Flatley). It traces our place alongside, and within, these hyperobjects that threaten to overwhelm us.

This was the implicit premise of my book, *Connected, or, What It Means to Live in the Network Society*, published in 2003. In *Connected*, I approached science fiction novels as exercises in social theory—or

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better, perhaps, as auguring tools in order to discern (in the words of Shelley) “the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present.” By means of an extended reading of K. W. Jeter’s cyberpunk masterpiece *Noir* (1998), together with briefer looks at texts by such SF writers as Philip K. Dick, Samuel R. Delany, and Misha Nogha, I was able to consider some of the ways in which new technologies, together with new social, political, and economic arrangements, were changing our lives. I called on science-fictional extrapolations in order to get a grip on the conditions of the emerging capitalist “network society”: globalized commerce, instantaneous connectivity, and ubiquitous digitalization.

What has changed in the years since I wrote *Connected?* I am tempted to say that we have just experienced more of the same. It’s hard not to be cynical about technological “innovation,” when Apple releases a new product that “changes everything” on a regularly scheduled yearly basis. And it’s hard not to feel caught in an endless loop when the only “solution” offered by both political parties to the problems resulting from the 2008 economic crash is to intensify the very policies—deregulation of finance and cuts in government spending—that caused the crisis in the first place. Yet we should remember that even the repetition and intensification of already-existing trends results in a kind of change. “More of the same” means that things are no longer the same—precisely because there are more of them. Eventually, we reach what today is called a “tipping point”—or what Friedrich Engels long ago called the moment of “the transformation of quantity into quality.” And such a transformation, I would argue, is precisely the condition of possibility for science-fictional extrapolation. In its own way, speculative fiction traces and amplifies the processes of speculation upon the future—financial, technological, and otherwise—that shape our society today.

Indeed, over the course of the past decade, processes of speculation have been woven ever more closely into the texture of our everyday lives. Our world today is composed as much of fictions as of actualities—as much of things that happen on screens or in optical cables as of things that we can see and touch directly. And

these fictions are largely speculative, in the sense that they are gambles on the future, wagers on forces we do not and cannot know. For instance, derivatives—the exotic financial instruments at the root of our present troubles—are, strictly speaking, what Marx called “fictitious capital”: titles to wealth that can never be exchanged for, or transformed into, actually existing goods and services. This is because their market value vastly exceeds the total value of goods and services held and produced in the world today. The prices of these derivatives are not tethered to actual economic production. Rather, they are determined on the basis of partial differential equations that can only be calculated by powerful computers. Wealth is thereby accumulated in the form of electronic records that are highly volatile and almost purely fantasmatic. These records bear only the most tenuous relations to any underlying physical assets. Such financial instruments are entirely speculative. But this does not mean that they are without efficacy. If anything, these financial fictions have a greater impact upon our everyday lives than the actual, physical production of goods and services does.

Financial derivatives, at least in their more mundane original forms, used to be called “futures contracts.” The phrase is still appropriate, because the purpose of these speculative instruments is precisely to enter into a contractual relation with the future: measuring it and quantifying it, assigning an owner to it, putting a present-day price upon all of its contingencies. There is a close affinity, therefore, between economic speculation and fictional speculation—or more crassly, between futurist extrapolation and corporate research programs. As the Afrofuturist critic Kodwo Eshun puts it, science fiction has become “a research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow.” Large global corporations seek desperately to anticipate the future, the better to take possession of it in advance. Somebody on Wall Street is doubtless already working on turning Richard K. Morgan’s scenario of “conflict investment” into an actuality. Despite their unbridled craziness and ungroundedness, financial markets are designed to colonize

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The Wild Winds of Possibility

Vonda N. McIntyre's *Dreamsnake*

Reviewed by Ursula K. Le Guin

When people ask me what sf books influenced me or what are my favorites, I always mention *Dreamsnake*.

Dreamsnake is in some ways a strange book, unlike any other in science fiction, which may explain the even stranger fact that it's not currently in print (except on line at <http://www.bookviewcafe.com/index.php/Dreamsnake>).

When people ask me what sf books influenced me or what are my favorites, I always mention *Dreamsnake*. Invariably I get a warm response—"Oh yes!" And people still tell me how much the book meant to them when they first read it and ever since. But these days, many younger readers don't know it exists.

The short story the book was based on won the 1973 Nebula; the book was an immediate success; it became and still is beloved. Its moral urgency and rousing adventure story are not at all dated. It should have gone from one paperback reprint to another.

Why didn't it?

I have some theories.

Theory #1: Ophidiophobia. The phobia is common and extends to pictures, even the mention, of snakes; and the book features them even in the title. A heroine who lets snakes *crawl* on her, and she's *named* Snake? Oh icky...

Theory #2: Sex. It's an adult book. Snake, though, is barely more than a kid, setting out on her first trial of prowess, so that young women can and do identify with her, happily or longingly (and her taste in men is far better than that cavewoman Ayla's). But could the book be approved for use in schools? The sexual mores are as various as the societies, including some very unorthodox customs, and Snake's sexual behavior is both highly ethical and quite uninhibited. She can afford to be fearless, because her people know how to control their fertility through biofeedback, how to prevent insemination through a simple, learned technique. But, alas, *we* don't.... Given the relentless fundamentalist vendettas against "witchcraft" and "pornography" (read *imaginative literature* and *sexual realism*) in the schools, few teachers in the 1980s could invite the firestorm that might be started by a rightwing parent

who got a hint of how young Snake was carrying on. Sexless hard-sf or Heinleinian fantasies of girlish docility were much safer. I think this killed the book's chance of being read widely as a text in junior high or high school, and even now may prevent its being marketed to the YA audience.

Theory #3: The hypothesis of gendered reprinting. It appears that as a general rule books written by men get reprinted more frequently and over more years than books written by women. If this is so, Heinlein has always been given a handicap over McIntyre and will always have one.

Looking on the bright side, however, good writing tends to outlive mediocre writing, real moral questioning to outlast rant and wishful thinking. *Dreamsnake* is written in a clear, quick-moving prose, with brief, lyrically intense landscape passages that take the reader straight into its half-familiar, half-strange desert world, and fine descriptions of the characters' emotional states and moods and changes. And its generosity to those characters is quite unusual, particularly in science fiction with its tendency to competitive elitism.

Take the birth-control-via-biofeedback idea—certainly one of the great technological-imaginative inventions, and appreciated as such by many of McIntyre's readers (although because it's not hard tech and is subversive of gender dominance, male critics have tended to ignore it). McIntyre doesn't make it a subject of celebration, excitement, or question; it's taken for granted, it's how things are. Meeting a young man whose education has been so cruelly mismanaged that he doesn't know how to control his fertility, Snake is appalled, but sympathetic. She knows how bitterly humiliated he is by what he can see only as a personal failure, like impotence, but worse, because for him to have a heterosexual relation might involve damage to the *other* person....

They do manage to solve his problem.

Yes, there is some wishful thinking in McIntyre's book, but it is so thoroughly, carefully worked out in terms of social and personal behavior that its demonstration of a permanent streak of kindness in human nature is convincing—and as far from sentimentality as it is from cynicism.

The writer Moe Bowstern gave me a slogan I cherish: "Subversion Through Friendliness." It looks silly till you think



about it. It bears considerable thinking about. Subversion through terror, shock, pain is easy—instant gratification, as it were. Subversion through friendliness is paradoxical, slow-acting, and durable. And sneaky. A moral revolutionary, rewriting rules the rest of us were still following, McIntyre did it so skillfully and with such lack of self-promoting hoo-ha that we scarcely noticed. And thus she has seldom if ever received the feminist honors she is due, the credit owed her by writers to whom she showed the way.

What I mean by sneaky: Take the character called Merideth. When I first read *Dreamsnake* I thought the odd spelling of the name Meredith was significant and tried so hard to figure out why this enigmatic, powerful person was called “merry death” that I totally missed what’s really odd about Merideth. Three-cornered marriages being usual in this society, Merideth is married to a man and a woman...sure, fine... But we don’t know whether as husband or as wife. We don’t know Merideth’s gender. We never do.

And I never noticed it till, in conversation about the book, I realized that I’d seen Merideth as a man—only because Meredith is a Welsh male name. There is no other evidence one way or the other, and McIntyre avoids the gender pronoun unerringly, with easy grace.

June Arnold’s *The Cook and the Carpenter* came out in 1973 to much acclaim by feminists and was read mostly by feminists. *Dreamsnake* was published five years later as science fiction and read by everybody who read science fiction. How many of them even noticed that the gender of a character had been left up to them to decide, or refuse to decide? I still remember the shock of realizing that I’d been well and truly subverted. All the stuff we were saying about gender as social construct, as expectation, was revealed to me as built solidly into my own mind. And by that revelation my mind was opened.

I wish this beautiful, powerful, and highly entertaining book were back in print for the generation of sf readers who missed it, and all the young readers ready to have their mind blown wide open by the wild winds of possibility. *Dreamsnake* is a classic, and should be cherished as such.

Ursula K. Le Guin met Vonda N. McIntyre at an early SFWA meeting in Berkeley (Ursula’s home town) when Ursula was thirtyish and the author of some but not yet innumerable books, and Vonda was, well she seemed about 15 but must have been over 21, because they went off together to the bar in the beautiful old Claremont Hotel, where they bonded. They have remained friends ever since, both in their daylight personas and as the shadowy, inscrutable figures of Ygor and Buntho, who do workshops, make books, hang curtains crooked, and send many, many emails between Portland and Seattle. Vonda is Ursula’s extraordinary webmistress and Ursula lured Vonda into the National Writers Union. This disclosure is made in the interests of balanced review judgments: if Ursula did not admire Vonda’s writing wholeheartedly, she wouldn’t write about it.

Ursula’s most recent publication is *Out Here: Poems and Images from Steens Mountain Country*, with photographer Roger Dorband, Raven Press, 2010. She graciously contributed a poem to the CSZ’s inaugural issue.

**She Lives
for Rose**

by Shweta Narayan

She lives on a mountain where snow will not melt, feasts
on ribbons of air, eggs
of amethyst and bone. Her breath
falls in diamond knives.

She weaves asbestos threads into slices of granite, trades
with women who melt snow in copper pots on trees
chopped and burned; who burn themselves
and blame the fire
and call her strange.

She seasons her eggs with copper flecks shaved
from a gong that rings thin through thin air
ribbons, and knows
that she lives.

Shweta Narayan was born—or as she describes it, smelted—in India. She has traveled through Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, The Netherlands, and Scotland. She now resides in California. She is a PhD student in linguistics. A great admirer of folk tales and fairy tales, she writes poetry, prose poems, and short fiction. At Clarion 2007 she received the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship for writers of color.





Walking Between Worlds

Akata Witch, by Nnedi Okorafor

Viking, April 2011, 349 pages, \$17.99

Reviewed by Uzuri Amini

Okorafor brings West African culture alive with scenes of everyday doings in the town, at home, and within the supernatural precincts...

One night twelve-year-old Sunny Nwazue, enjoying the flicker of a candle flame, sees the end of the world: “Raging fires, boiling oceans, toppled sky scrapers, ruptured land, dead and dying people” (p. 2). In that prophetic moment her life forever changes; she is catapulted out of her often mundane solitary existence into an otherworldly life as an *akata* (foreign-born) witch.

An albino female child born in the US, now living in Nigeria with her Igbo parents and two brothers, Sunny knows that she is different in more than one way: “I have West African features, like my mother, but while the rest of my family is dark brown, I’ve got light yellow hair, skin the color of ‘sour milk’ (or so stupid people like to tell me), and hazel eyes that look like God ran out of the right color” (p. 3). She’s an excellent soccer player, but being a girl means the boys don’t take her soccer playing seriously. And as an albino Sunny has a sensitivity to the sun, so she can play soccer only after sunset. To top it off she is also a good student among her peers who seemingly do not share her hunger for learning.

After her vision Sunny makes friends with a classmate, Orlu, a boy who attempts to protect her from other attacking students. He is also different—quiet-spoken and thoughtful. He introduces her to Chichi, a girl who doesn’t attend school but carries in her mind all kinds of knowledge gleaned from reading books; and Sasha, an African American boy newly arrived from the US, who contributes his *akata* persona with attitude—he’s not about to be pushed around by anybody! Together these four teenagers form an alliance that eventually leads to a loyal friendship as they receive individual and group lessons in facing their fears.

Sunny’s new friends, apprentices in the magical world to which she has just been introduced, share with her a life full of mystical people, events, and happenings.

A person who practices African spirituality as I do, or earth-based spirituality,

or who has other spiritual beliefs, may feel like they were born at the wrong time, to the wrong family. Varying experiences may make them feel even more different as they search for others who see the world and think as they do. It is only when they find reflections of what informs them from the inside out coming from others that they have a sense of belonging. Thus, Sunny’s connections with Orlu and the others opens to her a new life of acceptance as a member of the secret society of Leopard People.

Leopard People, Sunny learns, have always existed in countries and cultures all over the world with regional headquarters in various areas. She discovers that their West African headquarters, a neighborhood called “Leopard Knocks His Foot,” is only a short way from where they all live. Those without magical talents are called Lambs (“muggles” to you Harry Potter folks).

Their camaraderie propels Sunny and her friends forward faster in their quest to utilize their metaphysical talents in their lives and community. But having been born to Leopard People, Sunny’s friends are light years ahead in their learning and abilities. So she finds herself always playing catch up to increase her knowledge and skills in this new mode of life.

First there are the customs and rules of magic to learn. Next there are books to read and memorize, books about conjuring the actual magic. This is followed by practice, practice, practice, so the apprentices won’t make mistakes before their ever-watchful teachers. Sunny also has to figure out which teachers or Leopard People to avoid, because they don’t all have good intentions toward her. And being an albino, she finds she must master her ability to walk both in the land of the living and the ancestors. Besides all of this, Sunny must keep her family and school mates ignorant of her magical life as she works to accept who she is and her abilities. All these challenges threaten her everyday life.

Questions abound for Sunny. How did she get her talents? Why does her father seem to hate her? Will she ever be allowed to play soccer with the boys? What is the family secret her mother is keeping from her? Will she ever find her own spiritual mentor, as Chichi, Orlu, and Sasha do?

Then there are questions with wider implications. Aside from facing her personal



challenges Sunny needs to find out what, if anything, can be done to stop the world from being swallowed up in the destruction she saw going down in the candle flame at the book's beginning. And there's the small matter of the recent spate of murders of local children—who is killing them, and why? No one can sleep due to the depredations of an unseen foe known as only "Black Hat." Parents can't protect their children from him. All the adults are helpless. But the elders of Leopard Knocks His Foot inform Sunny and her friends that they are the ones responsible for stopping this mysterious killer.

How Sunny confronts her challenges and gets her answers makes for an exciting and riveting read. Nnedi Okorafor brings

West African culture alive with scenes of everyday doings in the town, at home, and within the supernatural precincts of Leopard Knocks His Foot. She provides us with a coming-of-age story filled with power—especially for young girls seeking some place where they will fit in and be accepted for who they are while they discover and hone their talents.

Akata Witch describes a milieu where magic is alive and well within the community of people of color. Here young people are being trained to become adept elders, to lead their communities through the chaotic times that engulf our world today and may decimate it tomorrow. Here readers can find magic, intrigue, danger, friendship, and their place of belonging, a place to which they can return over and over.

Uzuri Amini (Ishe Fa'lona Oshun Iya Oshogbo) is an initiated priest of Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of love, healing and art; as well as a writer, artist, and ceremonialist. She has contributed to several anthologies, notably *The Goddess Celebrates*; *Earth-walking Sky Dancers*; *A Waist is a Terrible Thing to Mind*; *Talking to the Goddess*; and both volumes of the Festival of the Bones series. She is also a member of the International Women's Writing Guild and the Elder's Council of Ile Orunmila Oshun (for twenty-one years) and core faculty of the School of Ancient Mysteries/Sacred Arts Center in Oakland, California, directed by Luisah Teish.



Girl Meets Boy, Ice Caps Melt

Birdbrain, by Johanna Sinisalo (translated from the Finnish by David Hackston)
Peter Owen Publishers, August 2010, 220 pages, \$17.95

Reviewed by Carrie Devall

Johanna Sinisalo's novel *Troll* (originally *Not Before Sundown*), which won the 2004 Tiptree Award, used snippets of scientific writings as well as fairy tales and fiction to create a world in which trolls exist, and wove scientific theories about evolution and pheromones into a conflict that lured its human protagonist away from human civilization. *Birdbrain* folds the latest science, speculation, and political conflict regarding global warming into the trekking trip of two young Finns, Heidi and Jyrki, through New Zealand and Tasmania, with evolution and neurobiology playing an intriguing role.

Shot through with quotes from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the only reading material available to Heidi for most of the trip, the narrative is simple in its thrust towards the geographical, emotional, and experiential goals of both trekkers. However, it is complex in its interpolation of other, less obviously relevant, material, including the ever more malign point of view of someone who appears to be Heidi's brother.

Birdbrain also takes a penetrating look at gender relations in this allegedly post-feminist era, quietly exploring the border-

lands where biological determinism and gender difference, nature and nurture converge and diverge. Via alternating points of view the reader experiences half the story through Heidi's lens, as she navigates the world of boorish men like the oil company clients her PR firm serves and also guys like Jyrki, ostensibly more enlightened and ecologically-minded yet hardly anti-sexist. Jyrki's point of view reveals a world more solidly centered around himself—which should be no surprise to feminists.

This novel's (usually) subtle skewering of the modern, so-called sensitive man is one of the many pleasures of the narrative. Jyrki would hardly deign to label himself sensitive or anti-sexist, these terms having no currency in his corner of the world. But he considers himself a better man than the more oafish males who demand Heidi's attention.

The skillful use of these two distinct points of view makes a surprisingly satisfying, dramatic story out of a couple of people doing a lot of walking and eating. Heidi is no model, blameless heroine, and Jyrki is not a completely clueless or irresponsible jerk. Two flawed people, admirable in their own ways, alternate between fumbling

Birdbrain folds the latest science, speculation, and political conflict regarding global warming into the trekking trip of two young Finns, Heidi and Jyrki, through New Zealand and Tasmania, with evolution and neurobiology playing an intriguing role.

Cont. on p.11





Gods' Truth

The Broken Kingdoms, by N. K. Jemisin

(The Inheritance Trilogy, Book 2)

Orbit, November 2010, 416 pages, \$13.99

Reviewed by Ama Patterson

The Broken Kingdoms is equal parts murder mystery, romance, and fantasy thriller in a refreshingly non-Eurocentric world

In the White Halls, the stark, pristine temples where citizens enact synchronized reverence or risk priestly sanction, the story might be told thus:

Time and time ago, there were The Three: Itempas, God of Day, Nahadoth, the Nightlord, and Enefa, Goddess of Twilight and Dawn. Siblings and lovers, they were once united, creating the universe and holding it in balance. They fought, in a devastating Gods' War that destroyed entire continents. Righteous Itempas slew Enefa, enslaved Nahadoth to mortal masters, banished their offspring, and claimed sole dominion.

It is famously said that history is written by the victors. In Senm, where the Arameri have for centuries ruled by the power of their captive gods, the historical records are full of simplistic platitudes and self-serving omissions. They cast Itempas as the embodiment of benevolent order, Enefa as The Betrayer, and Nahadoth as a shadowy monster to be feared. The truth is far more complicated, beautiful, and terrifying, and vastly more entertaining. This tale receives a most satisfying exploration in *The Broken Kingdoms*, N. K. Jemisin's excellent second installment in her Inheritance Trilogy.

Jemisin, whose story "Non-Zero Probabilities" was short listed in 2010 for both the Hugo and Nebula awards, introduced a rich, nuanced, and fabulously intriguing world in her acclaimed debut novel, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. In its conclusion the goddess Enefa was reborn. Nahadoth and their children were freed. Itempas was punished, condemned to wander the world as a mortal, anonymous and nearly powerless.

The main action of *The Broken Kingdoms* begins about ten years following these events. In that time Sky, capitol of the Arameri, has been transformed. Enefa's dramatic resurrection changed the landscape of the city itself. Godlings, the multitudinous children of the Three, mingle

freely with humans, attracting their own cadres of devotees. The Arameri are determined to defend their Itempas-ordained power against these so-called heretics, even in the absence of the god himself. "Order-Keepers," priests of Itempas, enforce Arameri rule with scrivener's magic forbidden to common folk. Ordinary citizens chafe beneath their increasingly fascistic heel.

Oree Shoth has fled her sheltered, back-water life, drawn by the city's magic. Physically disabled yet supernaturally gifted, Oree supports herself as an artist and vendor on the streets of Shadow, the less rarefied sprawl beneath the enormous, evergreen World Tree at Sky's center. For all her independence, Oree is something of a traditional romantic heroine: generous, resilient, young, beautiful, and vulnerable. She describes herself as "plagued by gods," and this quality places her at the center of the tale. She finds a mysterious deity in her garbage bin, dead at first appearance, and uncommonly taciturn once revived. She gives him a home, and a nickname: Shiny.

When Oree literally stumbles upon a murdered godling in a public alley, she attracts the unwelcome attention of the Order-Keepers. Angry gods and godlings are also hunting the killer of one of their own. Another godling, Madding, is a suspect; he is Oree's ex-lover and close friend, so she falls under their scrutiny, too. To complicate matters further, an upstart religious sect notices Oree's unusual abilities and forcibly recruits her for their own purposes. Their leader is a scrivener with lethal goals of his own. For Oree and her friends, navigating this factional maze of secrets and sorcery becomes a matter of survival. *The Broken Kingdoms* is equal parts murder mystery, romance, and fantasy thriller in a refreshingly non-Eurocentric world where magical and political power are inextricably linked.

Although mortal Oree narrates *The Broken Kingdoms*, the novel's most compelling characters are the deities. The godlings embody various concepts such as mercy, hunger, or discarded things, and manifest them in guises ranging from comical to monstrous. Sieh, the trickster, first-born of the godlings, who played a pivotal role in *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, makes a brief but poignant reappearance. The godlings'

[T]he novel's most compelling characters are the deities....

Jemisin does a wonderful job exploring the paradox of their divinity, by itself and as seen through the lens of mortal perception and belief.



parents, The Three, are immortal and immensely powerful, yet vulnerable to many human shortcomings. They make mistakes. They love imperfectly, suffer rejection and jealousy, and inflict incalculable damage on each other and the world because of it. Itempas is wisdom and order, but also rigidity and extreme cruelty. Religion has cast Nahadoth as the embodiment of evil, but he is also compassion and secret longings; he loves deeply and suffers unimaginably. Enefa, the Grey, Life and Death and Rebirth, has the somewhat thankless job of attempting to reconcile her brothers' oppositional essences. Jemisin does a wonderful job exploring the paradox of their divinity, by itself and as seen through the lens of mortal perception and belief. Additionally, Jemisin examines the nature of power, both magical and political, and explores the relationship between magic, art, and creativity.

Oree's narrative voice—matter of fact, wry, and occasionally irreverent—keeps weighty subjects from becoming ponderous.

Another delight of this book is its pacing. Jemisin excels at the slow reveal, gradually unwinding the thread of Oree's tale and following it back into the intricate tapestry of this universe, where nothing is as it seems at first glance. Each loop of the plot discloses more hidden history and provides greater insight into the focal characters, including Oree herself. Jemisin's worldbuilding and storytelling are first rate. One is reluctant to talk plot in great detail for fear of spoiling the fun for new readers. For those returning to this series, *The Broken Kingdoms* is a fully engaging expansion of Jemisin's canon and whets anticipation for her forthcoming *The Kingdom of the Gods*.

Jemisin's worldbuilding and storytelling are first rate.

Ama Patterson's short fiction is included in *80! Memories and Reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin* (Karen Joy Fowler and Debbie Notkin, eds; Aqueduct Press) and *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, (Sheree Renee Thomas, Ed.; Warner Books). She is a graduate of Clarion West 1999 and a member of the Beyon'Dusa Artists' Collective.

Girl Meets Boy... (cont. from p. 9)

and moments of mastery in a journey that challenges each differently. Jyrki's relentless search for the ultimate in solitude and the pure experience of untouched wilderness, and his meticulous calorie-counting and rigid enforcement of leave-no-trace camping methodology clash with Heidi's desire for occasional comfort and company and her rebellion against the men in her life.

Ironies form the backbone of the dramatic structure. Heidi's "weakness" may be their only lifeline, and Jyrki's "strengths" their downfall, even as he is technically correct and she engages in destructive actions. Those who seek to protect the purity of wilderness also tend to be those who feel they should be the singular exception, allowed to enter or invade it.

He is arrogant and often condescending, but Jyrki is capable of realizing he has made faulty assumptions about Heidi. He seems to represent the socially evolved male, Guy 3.0, but as with the global-ecological issues also at stake, the question remains: Is this enough?

Heidi knows she is out of control even as she righteously rebels against Jyrki's idealism and unwillingness to accommodate her different desires and priorities. Her instinct that a world without a central place for emotions and desire is already

a disaster zone is absolutely necessary to their survival, yet equally problematic.

Meaning and morals twist like Ouroboros, appropriate for a story about the fate of the world. The personal is political, and the political personal, at every juncture. Unsettling similarities of human and animal behavior are highlighted and captured with brief, simple snatches of dialogue, observations, emotion, and thought. Global climate change is viewed here from a narrow slice of reality, but the limited subjectivity of each protagonist magnifies its smallest effects to a hyper-real scale, making environmental destruction a true antagonist.

The background of sexism, which is never labeled as such, parallels the questions highlighted by the trek, especially by Jyrki's anti-tourism rantings about the imperialist mindset and humans' relationship with Nature, as concept and reality. Gender and sexism are central to these issues, and this book's gender consciousness provokes interesting questions. Social engineer or parasite, are those our choices? Are all humans parasites who adapt their social and physical environments to maximize their comfort, instead of adapting to their environment? And just how truly different are animals from us?

[T]his book's gender consciousness provokes interesting questions. Social engineer or parasite, are those our choices?

Carrie Devall recently won first place in the Oddcon 2010 speculative fiction contest. Her winning story, "Can't Stop, Won't," appears in *Northern Lights: 20 MinnSpec Tales* (Sam's Dot Press, 2010). She attended Clarion West in 2007 and writes from Minnesota, the land of ten thousand recounts.



Hyperbolic

Futures

(cont. from p. 5)

The future cannot actually be anticipated and controlled; the one thing we know for sure about it is that we cannot predict it, and that it is bound, at some point, to surprise us.

the future, by making it commensurate with the present.

Doubtless this project of colonizing the future will never entirely succeed. The future cannot actually be anticipated and controlled; the one thing we know for sure about it is that we cannot predict it, and that it is bound, at some point, to surprise us. One of the things that science fiction writing can do, therefore, is to register surprise about the future, to dramatize its unknowability and difference. In this way, science fiction can work to keep the future open, to wrest it away from predetermined corporate ownership. Such is the utopian dimension of science fiction, emphasized by such theorists of the genre as Fredric Jameson and Carl Freedman. In the past few decades, however, with the worldwide triumph of neoliberal policies, imagining radical transformation has become more and more difficult. Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and Mark Fisher have all pointed out that, today, we find it easier to envision total catastrophe than we do to imagine a social system that, however imperfect, is more humane than actually-existing capitalism. For Jameson, utopian thought has no positive content any longer, blocked as it is by the “realism” of our current ideological climate. Utopia today, he says, is only “a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right.” Under these circumstances, the best that science fiction writing can do, perhaps, is to make us more acutely aware of the ways that neoliberal capitalism is attempting to colonize the future, and of the ways that our hopes and dreams remain enmeshed within it. In this way, even the most dystopian fictional extrapolation can work at least to outline the bars of our prison, to make evident the limits of a condition that seems to be all-embracing.

Lauren Beukes’s *Moxyland* (2008) is one recent science fiction novel that engages in this kind of speculative extrapolation. The book is set in a near-future Cape Town, South Africa: a place still marked by the legacy of white supremacy, and where first-world affluence and privilege are starkly juxtaposed with the chaos and misery of the developing world. While Richard K. Morgan seems to take a grim delight in rubbing our faces in the most feral excesses of contemporary financial capitalism, Beukes is rather concerned with the

more humane question of how one might be able to survive amidst such savage conditions. *Moxyland* can be described as a latter-day cyberpunk fiction; it presents us with a group of precariously grounded characters who try to negotiate their way between corporate power structures on the one hand and a shady underworld of marginal subcultures and illicit tech on the other. But Beukes’ book is harsher, and less romanticized, than classic cyberpunk novels such as Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*, and Jeter’s *Noir*. There’s no space in *Moxyland* for the heroism of disaffected outsiders, like Gibson’s and Stephenson’s protagonists, who somehow manage to negotiate their way through a corrupt system without being overly tainted by it. Nor is there room for anything like Jeter’s morbid, disillusioned aestheticism (a stance that I explored at great length in *Connected*).

Instead, Beukes’s four narrators/protagonists find themselves, right from the outset, in utterly compromised positions. Tragically, they only seem able to play out roles that have been scripted for them in advance. They find themselves in a world whose degrees of freedom are as carefully circumscribed as those of the computer games that they frequently play. Indeed, it’s almost as if these four characters have themselves been generated out of some sort of computer-game combinatorial logic. Two of the four protagonists are male (Toby and Tendeka), and the other two are female (Kendra and Lerato). Two are white (Toby and Kendra), and two are black (Tendeka and Lerato). Two of them are idealistic and well-meaning innocents (Kendra and Tendeka), and the other two are thoroughly cynical hustlers (Toby and Lerato). All four protagonists think of themselves as free agents; but their opportunities for initiating action are in fact severely limited. At best, they are only able to choose among a fixed number of preexisting alternatives; and in many cases, even these choices have already been made for them. None of the four are able to grasp the extent to which they are being manipulated.

Kendra is a young, ambitious artist. She works in the old, nearly extinct medium of analog, chemically-based photography. Her pictures are open to chance and ac-

[S]cience fiction can work to keep the future open, to wrest it away from predetermined corporate ownership.



cident; they are “over- and under-exposed, bleached, washed out, over-saturated with colour, blotches and speckles and stains like coffee-cup rings, or arcs of white on white where the canister has cracked and let the light in.” All this is meant as a rebuke to the tyranny of the digital, with its perfectly processed images and its susceptibility to total manipulation. But Kendra herself is naïve enough to have willingly embraced technological control. In order to further her career, she is persuaded to literally become “branded.” She receives cutting-edge genetic surgery that greatly enhances her health and her strength. But in return for this, she agrees to become a sort of living advertisement for the soft-drink company that developed the tech. Its logo is permanently incised upon her wrist as a sort of glowing tattoo. And she suffers an addictive craving for the soft drink itself, which she needs to purchase and consume continually—and to be seen doing so in public as often as possible. Despite her earnestness and good intentions—and to a certain extent because of them—Kendra is a living embodiment of the contradictions of hipness and fashion in a corporate-dominated culture.

For his part, Tendeka is a political activist: an earnest revolutionary, engaged in organizing the poor and homeless, in sabotaging state and corporate security systems, and in spearheading a series of highly visible, largely symbolic protest actions. He gets tactical support from backers he meets anonymously, in an online virtual world. They are always egging him on to escalate the scope and increase the aggressiveness of his protests. We are not too surprised when we learn that these backers are actually *agents provocateurs* working for the state and corporate security apparatus. Tendeka himself never learns this, but in fact all his protest actions and attempts at sabotage have been carefully orchestrated from above. They have been staged in order to create the appearance of danger from terrorists. In this way, Tendeka’s actions really serve to provide an alibi for the imposition of ever-more intrusive surveillance and for increasing restrictions on civil liberties. In the end, then, Tendeka’s struggles are worse than futile. And once he has served his purpose, he is brutally destroyed.

Toby and Lerato, the cynical characters in *Moxyland*, are no more in control of

their destinies than are the earnest, idealistic ones. These hustlers congratulate themselves on harboring no illusions and on being nonconformist rebels. They are both confessedly out only for themselves, and they feel no loyalty toward the corporations and media organizations for which they ostensibly work. But in the end, they cannot help serving the corporations and the media, far more than they serve themselves. Toby is really just slumming. He comes from a background of privilege; and he knows that he will always be able to return there, despite the fact that (for the moment) he has been cut off by his family. When he isn’t seducing vulnerable young women or seeking to borrow money from shady accomplices, he strives for fame and power as a journalist/blogger, specializing in trendy subcultures. He sometimes helps out with Tendeka’s acts of sabotage, not out of any political conviction, but simply because he thinks that the ensuing disruption is cool—and that his ability to score a journalistic coup by getting an exclusive on it is even cooler. Toby will do just about anything, from facilitating chaos to betraying a trust, in order to increase his website’s hit count.

Lerato, on the other hand, comes from an impoverished background as an AIDS orphan. But now that she’s on the inside, employed by a large corporation and living cozily in a corporate enclave, she just wants to forget where she came from. She’s comfortable with a lifestyle in which there are always “lengthy mutual non disclosure contracts to sign before you can move on to the sex” with somebody from another corporation. Everything Lerato does serves the purpose not just of escaping her origins, but also of distancing herself from them as fully as possible. Having found her own route to affluence, she has nothing but scorn and disgust for the still-impoorished masses and their habits and desires. Lerato has fierce programming skills, which she uses to claw her way up the corporate ladder as quickly as possible—and also to pull off various scams of her own on the side. She revels in an image of herself as corrupt, ruthless, predatory, and dedicated to conspicuous consumption: a perfect mirror of the society in which she lives. But finally, Lerato learns that she also is just a

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They find themselves in a world whose degrees of freedom are as carefully circumscribed as those of the computer games that they frequently play.

Cont. on p. 14



Hyperbolic Futures (cont. from p. 13)

Moxyland is a ferocious deconstruction of the entire cyberpunk genre.

In the degraded world of Moxyland, every gesture, from every position, is immediately co-opted by an endlessly malleable corporate culture.

tool; she is forced to give up all her pretensions to independence. Her own cynicism and avarice are no match for those of her corporate overlords.

In a certain sense, *Moxyland* is a ferocious deconstruction of the entire cyberpunk genre. Cyberpunk largely works through the negative charisma—call it a sort of hipness or coolness—of the outsider figures who are its protagonists. These characters descend from other dissident figures in popular culture: the noir detective, with his world-weary integrity and detachment; the hipster of the Beat Generation; the punk-rock rebel, with his gleeful nihilism; the outlaw computer hacker. But in Beukes's novel, all these figures are drained of their negativity. Hipness and coolness no longer have any allure. There's nothing left of such attitudes but a capacity for self-delusion, propping up an easily commodified facade. In the degraded world of *Moxyland*, every gesture, from every position, is immediately co-opted by an endlessly malleable corporate culture. All the characters' acts of rebellion unsuccessful; but to call them futile or merely empty fashion statements would be to underestimate the degree to which these acts actually work to intensify and help reproduce the corporate order that the novel depicts.

Nonetheless, the most impressive thing about *Moxyland* is the way that Beukes manages to create a real degree of empathy for all four of her protagonists, even as she exposes them as hypocrites, poseurs, and fools. As I was reading the book, I felt sympathetically sad and sorry for Kendra; I warmly identified with Tendeka's passion for justice, even as its self-delusion became more and more apparent; I enjoyed following the zigzags of Toby's sly and sleazy self-publicizing maneuvers; and I couldn't help admiring Lerato's bitchiness, stubbornness, and general take-no-prisoners attitude—as well as her underlying awareness of just how precarious her situation of relative privilege is. That is to say, I invested emotionally in all four characters, at the same time that I remained acutely aware of how the novel was framing them as empty stereotypes, following predetermined and long-worn-out scripts. *Moxyland* turns largely on the tension between its demystification of these character types and its continued use of them as residual forms of subjectivity. It

may well be that such zombie personalities, shuffling on despite being already dead, are the only forms of selfhood that we are still able to imagine, and that we can still hope to inhabit, in a neoliberal world of universal cynicism and privatized social control.

In *Moxyland*, all these character types and the social relations among them are mediated through mobile phone technology. Mobile phones are cheap enough and portable enough to be widespread even in the poorer parts of the developing world. A mobile phone is a quintessentially *personal* device; and yet at the same time it functions as a node in a wide-ranging, corporate-controlled network. In Beukes's extrapolation, the mobile phone is both an essential marker of personal identity and a means of corporate intervention, surveillance, and control. In the world of the novel, your phone is really your life; you need it for much more than talking, texting, and Web surfing, for your mobile phone defines, guarantees, and regulates who you are. The powers you possess and the limitations to which you are subject are all registered on your SIM card. The phone is used for all commercial transactions, replacing both cash and credit cards. You literally can't go anywhere without it: for it locks and unlocks doors, in lieu of keys and security codes, and it determines the places to which you are permitted or denied access. And of course, your phone allows the authorities to track your location at all times and contains an electroshock device, which the police can use to incapacitate you at will, from a distance, by inducing something like an epileptic seizure.

Beukes thus imagines the mobile phone as a device allowing for the postmodern extension of South Africa's notorious apartheid-era "pass laws." These laws required non-white people to carry "pass books" with them at all times, which determined where they were allowed and not allowed to go. In this way, the mobility of nonwhite people could be strictly regulated. In the near-future, post-apartheid South Africa of *Moxyland*, these passes have become universal, at the same time that they have been virtualized. Now your phone determines electronically where you may and may not go; there is no more need for actual papers. And the mobile phone makes its discriminations on a post-apartheid,

[T]he most impressive thing about Moxyland is the way that Beukes manages to create a real degree of empathy for all four of her protagonists, even as she exposes them as hypocrites, poseurs, and fools.



strictly “individualized” basis. Decisions of inclusion and exclusion are no longer grounded in crude racial categories. Instead, they are made on the fly, case by case, with reference to such ever-changing factors as income and corporate status. The meshes of control become finer and more precisely articulated, even as they spread out more and more widely. With such technology, the same “flexibility” and precise, point-by-point control that are so necessary to contemporary finance and industry also serve to regulate and manage human populations.

The hyperbolic futures projected by novels like *Moxyland* and *Market Forces* are of course neither inevitable, nor even likely to happen. And yet they point us to certain potentialities—merely incipient, yet altogether real—that are already

astir within our present moment. At a time when speculative finance tends to invest in everything, to give a price to everything, and thereby to take possession of everything, and draw profit from everything, speculative fiction works as a kind of counter-tendency. Even at its most dystopian, it suggests ways in which new technologies and new forms of subjectivity may become sites of social struggle. Think of the situation unfolding in Egypt even as I write, where mobile phones have been used as organizing tools, and even as weapons, both by the revolutionary public and by the state security forces. I remain convinced that fictional speculation is an urgent necessity, at a time when financial speculation and the technologies that serve it seem determined to efface futurity altogether, by making it indistinguishable from the present.

The hyperbolic futures projected by novels like Moxyland and Market Forces are of course neither inevitable, nor even likely to happen. And yet they point us to certain potentialities—merely incipient, yet altogether real—that are already astir within our present moment.

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Steven Shaviro is a cultural critic who has written widely on philosophy, postmodernism, cinema, literary theory, the networked society, and consumer culture. He is the author of the theoretical fiction *Doom Patrols*. He earned a PhD from Yale in 1981 and now resides with his family in Detroit where he teaches literature and film at Wayne State University.





Bread and Butter Lite

Destination: Future, edited by Z. S. Adani and Eric T. Reynolds
Hadley Rille Books, February 2010, 316 pages, \$15.95

Reviewed by Karen Burnham

The wide variety makes for entertaining reading, but taken collectively it seems to lack a strong center.

Destination: Future is an anthology that does just what it says on the tin. Edited by Z. S. Adani and Eric T. Reynolds, it consists of twenty-one stories (seventeen originals and four reprints) that are all set in the future. Aside from that, it is hard to view the stories as part of a more coherent design. There are stories here that are about science or pure adventure, near-future or far-future, set on far away planets or here on Earth. The wide variety makes for entertaining reading, but taken collectively it seems to lack a strong center.

Most of the stories (perhaps inevitably) fall into a category that I label using a phrase from Joanna Russ's old *F&SF* review columns: "routine, unoriginal, mildly interesting, and readable." They are bread-and-butter stories for the sf aficionado. Only a few evoked a stronger response when I read them, either positive or negative. The anthology starts off on a high note with Sara Genge's "No Jubjub Birds Tonight." It sets up a dichotomy between a scientist/inventor who is fascinated with the clockwork life forms on an extraterrestrial planet and his guide, who tries to keep him within her culture's limits. He inevitably blunders off and has to be rescued. In the end he learns respect for the planet's culture, and she comes to appreciate his inquisitive nature. The story does a nice job of showing the competing interests at stake when one undertakes scientific inquiry, and how having patience and respect can lead to useful compromise.

The second story, "The Embians" by K. D. Wentworth, continues on the theme of scientific inquiry. Two graduate students are studying the life forms on another planet. The viewpoint character is the junior of the two, Shayna, who is by far the more impulsive. She believes that the color flashes of the native life forms constitute a true language, but has not yet been able to convince her more staid senior colleague, Mae. So Shayna goes haring off on her own into the dangerous jungle with a colored lamp and proceeds to bond with the locals in a way that is evocatively sex-

ual. She is eventually rescued by Mae, who doesn't understand or believe what Shayna is telling her, only seeing her taking foolish risks. In the end Shayna forces the same experience onto Mae, even though Mae repeatedly yells at her to stop. Mae is almost shattered by the experience, but in the end it seems that Shayna has made it into a positive experience for them both. I didn't like this story: I felt that its ending endorsed shockingly unethical behavior, even if it is sex-positive. However, it's clear that there's enough meat on the story to be able to argue with it, which is more than can be said of most.

The anthology hits a serious nadir with Michael Burstein's story, "Hope." This story cannot be argued with, only scorned for its atrocious characterization and collection of clichés strung into a plot. Samantha Jones is the hereditary captain of a generation starship, but: "She kept asking the engineers about lowering the gravity, and they kept giving her the same runaround, explaining to her why the laws of physics made it a difficult proposition, if not impossible. She would nod her head as she pretended to understand their byzantine explanations." In every way she is written as if she is a whiny fourteen-year-old, but when a time traveler from the future comes back to warn of disaster, he insists that "In my time...you were remembered as the most important captain of them all... We never saw you as a victim. The future hailed you as a hero." He has to reassure her on this point because immediately prior to this she has uttered the worst line of dialog I have ever read in a piece of fiction: "No one is a victim as much as I am!" She is upset because she may have to make a difficult decision, although it isn't difficult at all once all the clichés resolve themselves into a simple solution that makes everyone (but the reader) happy.

Luckily the anthology takes a turn for the better with Sandra McDonald's story "Watching," one of the few stories that I wish were longer—a high compliment for a short story. An alien race learns that the Earth will soon be destroyed by a comet. They can't stop the comet, but they can evacuate any humans who want to leave. However, in their culture there is no privacy, and everyone can see what anyone is doing at any time. To give Earthlings a

16 © *The anthology starts off on a high note with Sara Genge's "No Jubjub Birds Tonight."*

[I]t's refreshing that this collection feels a bit like an expanded issue of Analog—with a greater diversity of themes, characters, and authors....



taste of what they're in for, they transform all communications devices into terminals of a Panopticon, able to look in on any scene anywhere. On a submerged nuclear submarine, the crew finds out things they'd rather not and have to make tough decisions about their future. The personal drama of the intimate setting is particularly well done here.

Finally, towards the end of the book comes my personal favorite story, "The Angel of Mars" by Michael Barretta. This is a near-future story dealing with NASA exploration of Mars. I work for NASA myself, and Barretta nails the culture, technology, and political realities of the agency with 100% accuracy. He also delivers a story that opens up a realm of possibilities

with its ending, as opposed to narrowing and closing down as too many short stories do. There's a quantum-brained robot, human astronauts, Martian life, and politicians, and if I happened to spot a plot hole or two in the story, I enjoyed the whole thing too much to point them out here.

Today's sf short fiction market tends to be dominated by near-future Earth-based stories. So it's refreshing that this collection feels a bit like an expanded issue of *Analog*—with a greater diversity of themes, characters, and authors than is usually found in that august digest these days. However, with so few stories rising above (or falling below) the level of routine, *Destination: Future* does little to leave a strong impression in the mind of the reader.

Barretta nails the culture, technology, and political realities of the agency [NASA] with 100% accuracy.

Karen Burnham is vocationally an engineer and avocationally a fiction reviewer. She works at NASA Johnson Space Center as an electrical engineer. For the past few years she has reviewed science fiction and fantasy for venues such as *Strange Horizons*, *SFSignal*, and *Salon Futura*. She has recently taken over as the editor of *Locus* magazine's Roundtable Blog.



Wars Turned Inside Out

Of Blood and Honey (Fey and the Fallen), by Stina Leicht
Night Shade Books, February, 2011, 319 pages, \$14.99

Reviewed by Paige Clifton-Steele

Fairies: they don't like metal. They're fickle in their allegiances. They're quick to see a slight. And they drive like maniacs.

Stina Leicht's *Of Blood and Honey* is, as you can infer from the above, an urban fantasy. Set in 1970s Northern Ireland, it finds its unlikely hero in Liam Kelly. Known to most as an illiterate kid from a Catholic ghetto, Liam is secretly a fairy—and one hell of a closet case. His supernatural identity and heritage make him more and other than the working-class people who rear him. Liam's secret is something half-glimpsed and only, it seems, under duress. It gives him no license. It cannot keep him from becoming embroiled in his country's political strife. It cannot keep him from spending years interned in the infamous Long Kesh prison camp, where he is further radicalized and primed for work in the Irish Republican Army.

It does, however, make him an unwilling partisan in another struggle—this one an enigmatic war between fallen angels, the Fey, and a sort of Vatican version of the X-Files crew. It's a war that we come to see is at least as old as the human one and perhaps ineluctably bound up with it. Meanwhile, Liam careens through his mundane

life partially shielded by his ignorance and partially handicapped by it. To the extent that his difference can be wielded against his enemies, he sometimes embraces it. To the extent that it fragments his life, it is a burden—and probably a sin to boot.

Of Blood and Honey does a service to the human war it treats of when it gets at the profound entanglements of class, religion, and family that work to divide people from each other, and people within their very selves. Ireland's sectarian crisis increasingly worms its way from the outer world into the hushed interior of Liam's psyche, where it becomes something else: addiction, moral torment. Is a dead Catholic worth more than a dead Protestant? Liam must ask himself this for the first time quite late in the book.

Meanwhile, the shadowy supernatural war takes an opposite trajectory. Manifesting as a secret shame, Liam's battle to control what seems only a lawless id, it will at last connect him with a history he did not know was his. By the end of the novel these twinned wars have turned themselves inside out. How will they play out in a future book? (Since the epilogue all but says "stay tuned," I expect there will be more.) Just how much intersection will their histories reveal?

Of Blood and Honey...gets at the profound entanglements of class, religion, and family that work to divide people from each other, and people within their very selves.

Cont. on p. 19





Lovely Disturbances

The Universe of Things, by Gwyneth Jones

Aqueduct Press, January 2011, 279 pages, \$18.

Reviewed by Nisi Shawl

When I grow up I want to be Gwyneth Jones. I want to have won the Philip K. Dick Award for *Life* and to have shared the first Tiptree ever for a trilogy which makes its readers believe that in the near future we're all going to emulate diaper-wearing, vermin-infested, cleft-palate alien marsupials, because that's who will conquer the planet, and that's how colonialism works.

But at age 55 I could arguably be considered a grown-up. Perhaps I am who I'm going to be already. In which case I still have the pleasure of reading Jones, admiring her audacity, and reviewing her latest book, *The Universe of Things*.

CERN provided Aqueduct Press with a colorful poster diagramming cosmological developments from the Big Bang to the present. Within covers thus cheerfully decorated, this book collects fifteen stories dating from 1988 through 2007 and running from one page to thirty-five (for more novella-length pieces see *The Buonarotti Quartet*, also from Aqueduct). "Identifying the Object," "Collision," "Blue Clay Blues," and the book's title story all have ties to the Tiptree-worthy Aleutian trilogy alluded to above. They are powerful, beautiful, wonderful in conception and execution. "The Eastern Succession" harks back to *Divine Endurance* and *Flowerdust*, novels set on a Malaysian peninsula transformed by global warming and world economic collapse. Or perhaps "Succession" harks forward rather than back. Time is certainly not unidirectional: not in reality, and not in *The Universe of Things*.

As Anna, journalist narrator of "Identifying the Object" notes, crucial events foreshadow themselves; as Peenemunde Buonarotti, inventor of a method of instantaneous trans-galactic travel tells her interviewer in "Collision," "there is no duration" (p. 111). Ghosts can originate in the future as well as the past, or from moments never rising above mere potentiality. Sometimes the spectral characters are less problematic than the mundane. With-

out spoiling the lovely disturbances they'll cause in your mind I can't cite each specific story in which these particular contradictions appear.

But there are others....

"In the Forest of the Queen," *Universe's* opener, initiates readers into a fairyland populated by sexualized singing frogs and big-eyed androgynous beings with shimmering wings: a fantasy? A hyper-real future based on universally distributed computing power and ubiquitous virtuality?

"Red Sonja and Lessingham in Dreamland" brings together two icons of imaginative fiction: heroic Lessingham of E.R. Eddison's late-Renaissance-inspired Zimianvian trilogy meets the pulp-inspired warrior maiden Red Sonja in a therapeutic virtual reality. The story sticks fairly close to the perspective of the "hollow-cheeked and bloated" (p. 36) woman playing Red Sonja's role. And perhaps also, as her doctor hints, the part of her rapist, Lessingham?

"Grazing the Long Acre" first leads its readers to the gradual realization that the narrator is a sex worker who's sinking fast into run-of-the-mill danger, facing the loss of a life the exact opposite of picturesque. Then, while she cruises prosaically flat Polish freeways, we find her encountering a serial killer? A self-made social worker? A crimelord's victim-cum-enabler? A Madonna? A chthonic feminine force rising from regions deeper than Christianity's teachings?

In his introduction to *Universe*, critic Steven Shaviro writes of the tension between Jones's characters. Power dynamics are a staple of these stories, but what remains with me after I've finished them is the tension between myself and the author's effects. Again and again I was pulled across boundaries, from the mimetic to the fantastic, from the assumptive to the unanticipated inevitable, from the past to the future, the living to the dead. A Virgil of the sfnal cosmos, Jones guided me through *The Universe of Things* with a sure tread and a firm grasp.

Time is certainly not unidirectional: not in reality, and not in The Universe of Things....

Ghosts can originate in the future as well as the past, or from moments never rising above mere potentiality.



My one complaint about this collection is that every story is a reprint. True, they come from widely various sources. True, there were those I had never seen before. But each of them has been seen before by somebody.

I want what I believe you want, too, if only you're only smart enough to realize it. Since I can't be Gwyneth Jones when I grow up, I want all her stories at once, without duration. *The Universe of Things* and then some. Everything new. Now.

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Nisi Shawl's story collection *Filter House* (Aqueduct Press, 2008) won the James Tiptree, Jr. Award. Since 1999 Shawl has reviewed science fiction for *The Seattle Times*. She is coeditor of the forthcoming anthology *Strange Matings: Octavia E. Butler, Science Fiction, African American Voices, and Feminism*, and editor of *WisCon Chronicles 5: Writing and Racial Identity*. In May she will be WisCon 35's Guest of Honor.

Wars Turned Inside Out (cont. from p. 17)

Of Blood and Honey has only a handful of characters, drawn with varying degrees of believability. Liam is a shambler in his own life, prodded on by love of home and wife and god; Mary Kate, his wife, is smart, politically savvy, intellectually ambitious, and forgiving of foibles, but she is understandably wary of the creature she has married. She, in some part, exemplifies the problems of Republican women of the time—politically ferocious but restricted to auxiliary roles. Sadly, this interesting character dies early—raped, murdered, and rather unaccountably pregnant. She becomes here something of a maiden-cold-as-clay, a figure of sentimental pathos who catalyzes male melodrama. In this instance, I think that the book's reliance on tropes of Irish folklore does it a disservice. Liam rarely remembers her as a person; he and his tormenting inner voice are united in reminding us that she was pregnant with his child. This seemed an inverted mirror of Ireland at the time, in which it was the large-scale loss of men from the community that gave rise to female violence, political organization, and self discovery.

Liam's parents, the puca and the human woman, are another storybook pair, preserving their long-suffering love in a time

inhospitable to love. Liam's friend Oran, though, is a distinctly modern character—the kind of human rubble that guerrilla warfare might reduce a person to.

Father Murray is that familiar creature, the demon-hunting Catholic priest, whom Leicht is sometimes able to elevate above his stock origins. However, he remains perplexingly slight in his motivations: in one scene, he goes earnestly into a meeting of his secret demon-hunting sect with the message that their centuries-old nemesis isn't so bad after all. Predictably, the church doesn't take kindly to the message.

Emma Bull shocked fantasy fans when she combined Irish-style fairies and contemporary urban life in *War for the Oaks*. Now that combination is less startling. What Stina Leicht brings to the genre is the willingness to face the most concentrated of urban horrors—contemporary war—and juxtapose it with old stories to see which of our modern monsters may have joined us from an earlier age, and which of our old ballads still scan.

What Stina Leicht brings to the genre is the willingness to face the most concentrated of urban horrors—contemporary war—and juxtapose it with old stories to see which of our modern monsters may have joined us from an earlier age....

Paige Clifton-Steele lives in Seattle where she works graveyard shift at a boarding house for schizophrenics, runs a feminist science fiction book club, and writes poems from time to time. She is an alumna of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.





Romantic Lesbians with Robot Fingers

Steam-Powered: Lesbian Steampunk Stories, edited by JoSelle Vanderhooff
Torquere Press, January 26, 2011, 376 pages, \$13.95 (US)

Reviewed by Liz Henry

[T]ales that slip outside of imperialist power structures to see them from multiple perspectives, or that look somewhere else entirely.

Steam-Powered: Lesbian Steampunk Stories tells of trains and zeppelins, clockwork and angst—in Manhattan, Prague, Guayana, Luxor, New Orleans, San Francisco, North Africa, Dimashq, Akbarabad—in tales that slip outside of imperialist power structures to see them from multiple perspectives, or that look somewhere else entirely. It's not only *not* full of Fail, it's lovely and very exciting!

Several writers explore relations between rather down-to-earth women and women who are far more privileged, seeming like princesses of steampunk: the spoiled teenager on a train in Georgina Bruce's "Brilliant"; the business owner who loves her employee but fails to recognize her motivations in life in Matthew Kessel's "The Hands that Feed"; the obsessed inventor CEO from Beth Wodzinski's "Suffer Water." They slam up hard against their own Fail and the failures of power and privilege, sometimes redeeming themselves, but more often crashing and burning.

"Steel Rider" by Rachel Manjia Brown creates a world-between-worlds where traumatized women end up on giant scary robot mounts/companion animals and are vigilantes in the deserts of the US West. I wanted that story to last forever. It made me go, "Oh, yeah, that's right. That's just how it is!" N.K. Jemisin's "The Effluent Engine" stars a secret agent from Haiti, Jessaline Dumond, searching New Orleans for an engineer who can extract methane fuel from sugar cane waste; this story, too, filled me with the satisfying sense that history had actually happened in just this way.

The prize for most perturbing lesbian sex scene(s) and bleak, rage-filled politics goes to "Under the Dome" by Teresa Wymore. After a bitter war devastates North Africa, the world sends its criminals and political prisoners to an enormous factory ghetto. In a domed city in the wasteland, the prisoners and their descendants are grafted with animal cells so that every kind of job has an ideal hybrid. The story's anti-heroine is a shark hybrid who cruises the streets

sleeplessly, sensing the electric currents of people and raping suicidal, desperate prostitutes and slumming rich ladies. Wow, it's powerful.

"Clockwork and Music" by Tara Sommers also has major trauma potential as two young inmates of an insane asylum fall in love and discover the horrible, but almost forgivable, secret of the kind doctor at its head. I'm not sure how this story got to me, but something echoed deeply in the aura of doom generated as its depressed heroine undergoes her queer awakening, her adoration of the meteorically brilliant, manic inventor girl, and her discovery of the underlying failures of much that passes for health care.

Mikki Kendall's "Copper for Trickster" made me think of the sadness of Omelas turned inside out. Women and girls stolen from lesbotopia are enslaved, beaten, and raped by male alien invaders. The heroine furthers her beloved's plan for revolution and escape—a bargain with a trickster god—and feels the pain of paying a terrible price for revolution.

"Owl Song" by D.L. MacInnes was interesting for its slyness. Its charmingly enthusiastic, dissatisfied inventor, Aphra, goes to Guyana to do some research into "aluminium." There, she has very colonial feelings about the "jungle wild" "savage" ladies. This gave me some unease, but the story makes the Guyana ladies' view of the privileged zeppelin-building white girl come through. When Aphra looks around Georgetown confusedly wondering where the bauxite is (Well, *Brazil* has it!) I had to laugh. At first I identified with Aphra, so oppressed for her gender and queerness and geeky passions, then was sucker-punched once she got to Guyana and ignored her landlady and mentor's advice.

Don't get me wrong; *Steam-Powered* isn't all about the trauma. There's plenty of adventure, escape, and joy—even the slippery, swoony kind of ecstasy where people lick fruit off each other and spasm and jackknife and drown and slide and do all



the things romantic lesbians do in texts, except with clockwork brass robot fingers. What could be better?

The last two stories in *Steam-Powered* stand out especially. “The Padishah Begum’s Reflections” is an alternate history by Shweta Narayan. It’s an intricate story, the clockwork jewel of the anthology. “Reflections” had me frantically looking up the history of pre-Jacquard punch-card-driven looms. I had to read Narayan’s story three times and think about it deeply while taking notes, which made me supremely happy. The story’s pattern reaches clear into an intensely political lesbian romance between the Lady Emperor’s robot daughter Jahanara and Maitresse Vaucanson. French, Mughal, Maratha, and Devangari (a sort of divine clockwork jewel people) politics intertwine across a hundred and fifty years; three cities; a mountain pass; French, Urdu, Greek tongues; and stories within stories. Unless you know much more history than I do, you might want to read “Reflections,” study up on Vaucanson,

Tipu, Jahanara, and Chhatrapati Shivaji, then reread it. Also, I did not know that Napoleon’s ambition as he invaded Egypt was to connect his empire with Tipu’s. Now I know it...with the added joy of steampunk lesbians, who make everything much more awesome!

After that orgy of awesomeness and history and beauty, I didn’t expect I could be blown away, but Amal El-Mohtar’s “To Follow the Waves” was just perfect. It’s set in Dimashq (Damascus), and its heroine, Hessa, is a skilled jeweller who can infuse a gem with dreams and fantasy. Each thing she creates is a hologram of memory, like a perfect poem its owners can explore while asleep. I loved this line: “only think of something you yourself find beautiful—horses, berries, books—and hide it beneath layers and layers of desire until the thing you love is itself obscured.” Hessa, the dreamy poet, realizes too late her romanticism is oppressive when inflicted on an actual human being.

[In] “The Padishah Begum’s Reflections”... French, Mughal, Maratha, and Devangari (a sort of divine clockwork jewel people) politics intertwine across a hundred and fifty years; three cities; a mountain pass; French, Urdu, Greek tongues; and stories within stories.

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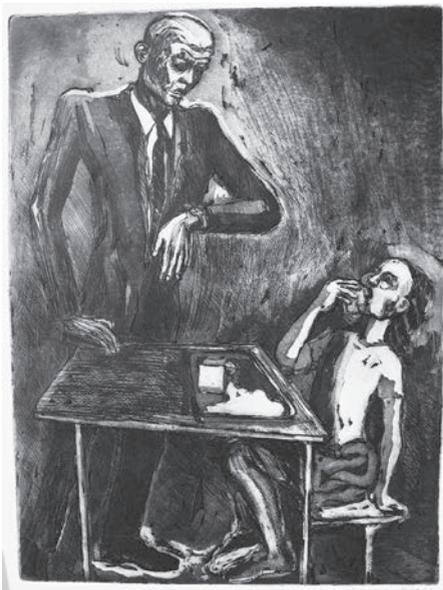
LESBIAN STEAMPUNK BINGO

Libraries	Aluminium	Bombazine	Gutta-percha	Post-colonial rage
Brawling	Thighs	Cruel factory overseers	Green eyes	Feverish waifs
Revolution	Little jeweled pistols	OMG ROBOT PONIES!	The word "quim"	Small business owners
Smudged faces	Obsessed Inventors	Betrayal	Zeppelins	Looms
Clockwork dolls	PTSD	Tribadist-hating authorities	Anywhere that isn't London	Clefts

Bingo card courtesy of Liz Henry

Liz Henry has published poems, translations, stories, and articles in *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Poetry Flash*, *Two Lines*, *Cipactli*, *Fantastic Metropolis*, and *Strange Horizons*. She edited *The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 3: Carnival of Feminist SF* for Aqueduct Press. At bookmaniac.org, she blogs about feminism, writing, and technology, and is a co-founder of feministsf.net and geekfeminism.org.





On Time

Susan Simensky Bietila

I'm writing about artwork after spending three days during the past week at the massive demonstrations in Madison, Wisconsin. It was a complete surprise to find myself in this epicenter, as I am in the Teachers Union. My "day job" is as School Nurse at a Milwaukee Public High School. (I have been doing political artwork since the mid 1960s, but as we all know, doing leftist political artwork is not a family-supporting job.) Collective Bargaining gives Teachers and School Support Staff, who have students' interest at heart, a say in how schools are run. Teachers Unions are the strongest voice against corporate interests who are working hard to privatize all education in the U.S. *On Time* is a series of five color prints—etching and aquatint. Starting with children being timed as they eat, disciplined to live by the clock, and forced out into a dismal world of nuclear industrially polluted despair. It is about indoctrination to live according to the constraints of industrially conceived time. In this dystopia, Obedience trumps Critical Thinking when it comes to education for the masses in the ever narrowed test-driven model of life.

I can identify several strands that made this series possible. I started taking graduate classes in printmaking in the late 1980s after several decades with no access to a press. My family was living collectively with graduate students who were reading Foucault. I read *Discipline and Punish* the same year as my husband organized a Summer reading group on Utopian and Dystopian Science Fiction—a weekly discussion and pot luck dinner on our front porch. Attended by upwards of 30, graduate students in fields from Physics to Architecture as well as English and Foreign Languages, environmental activists and anti-war organizers, punk band musicians and transgender activists, as well as our two pre-teen sons participated.

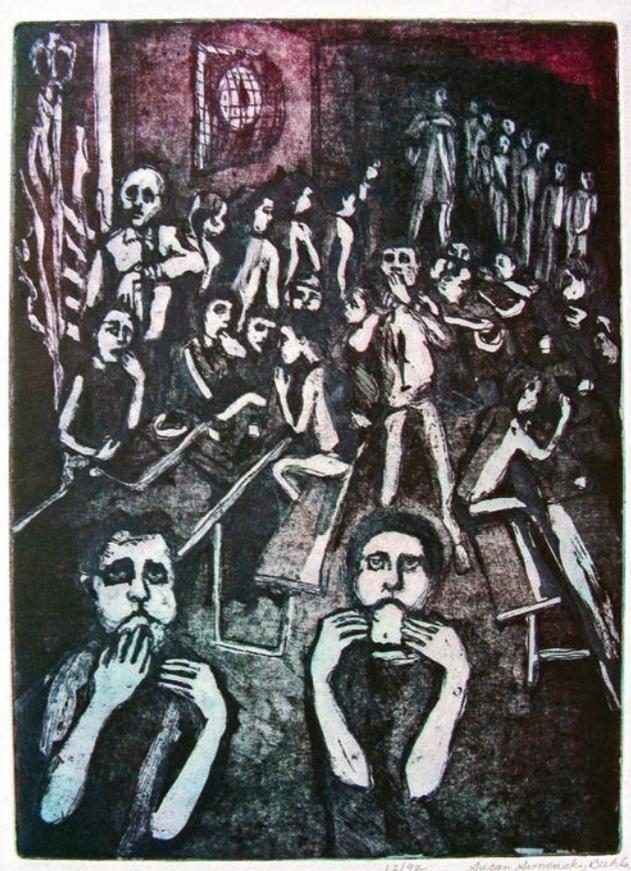
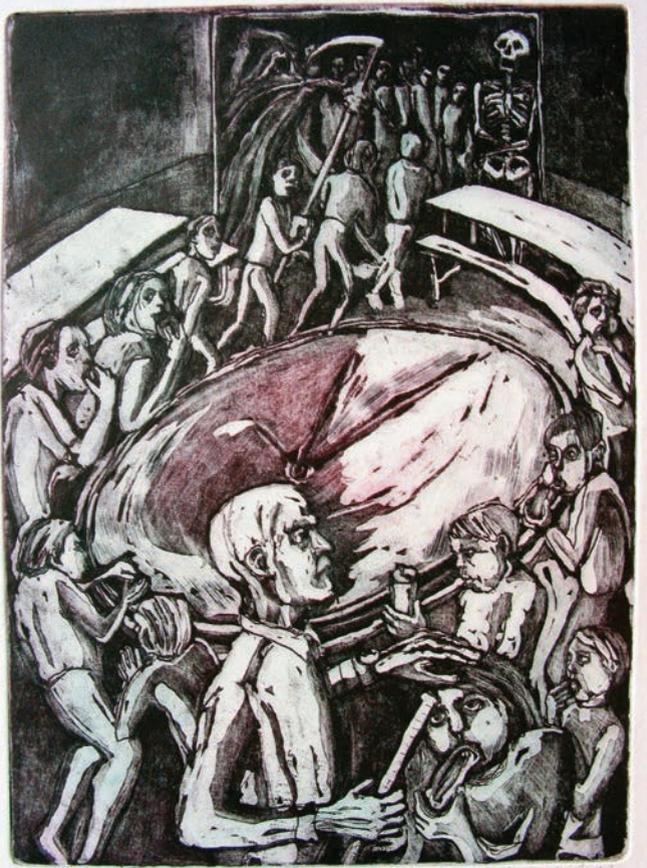
I was struggling to gain mastery over the use of metaphor while keeping my artwork pointed and political. My goal was to

sustain a narrative. My older son had been to an elementary school that used Assertive Discipline, a behaviorist method used to manipulate students into compliance with perceived rewards and punishments, while presenting a stultifying, watered down curriculum. My son, who was driven by a passion to learn, rebelled. My younger son had been vomiting daily after being forced to eat lunch in 10 minutes, as teachers counted down the minutes throughout the meal. Schools should teach Critical Thinking, learning a joyful process of discovery, and meals should be a relaxed social experience, but this clearly was not happening. The whole family researched Assertive Discipline and was active against these abuses with some success.

When I presented the *On Time* series for critique to the Graduate Art Faculty, the comments ranged from clueless to vicious. They had nothing good to say about the content, but admitted that the five pieces did comprise a narrative. One could not understand why anyone would want to do political art. Another said that I intellectualized too much, and that real art should not be so premeditated. The third, a Postmodernist Critical Theory expert, said that she could not see how I could claim that Foucault had any influence. The series was instantly popular on campus and published initially in the *Cream City Review*, the college literary magazine. Individual plates were later published on the cover of *Anarchist Studies* and continue to travel as part of the renowned show *Paper Politics*.

Since doing *On Time*, I have continued to do serial narratives, as prints, in nontraditional photographic media and documentary photography, with series on political street theatre. Then I met up with artists from *World War 3 – illustrated magazine*, and they invited me to draw stories. My next story will be about the events in Madison. I began curating shows in the 1990s, co-curated *Drawing Resistance – a d.i.y. traveling art show*, which went to 32 cities across the US and Canada from 2001-2004, and co-curated *Graphic Radicals*, 30 years of art from *World War 3 – illustrated*, traveling now.

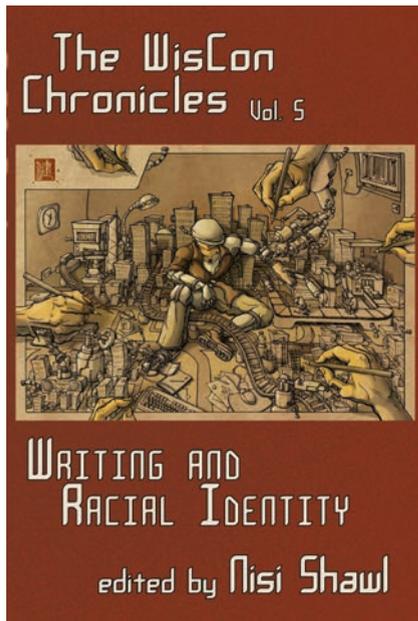




Susan Simensky Bietila is a visual artist who collaborates with social justice groups and movements. She works in a variety of media including drawings, prints, comics, photography, collage, guerilla theatre, and installations. She is noted for her World War 3 comics series. Her work appears in the *The WisCon Chronicles, Volume 2*.

www.worldwar3illustrated.org

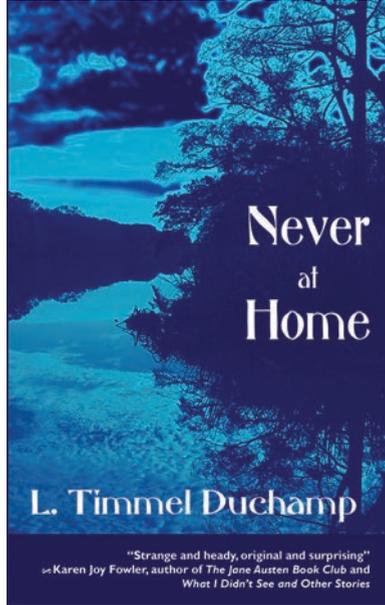




The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 5
Writing and Racial Identity
edited by WisCon 35 GoH
Nisi Shawl

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