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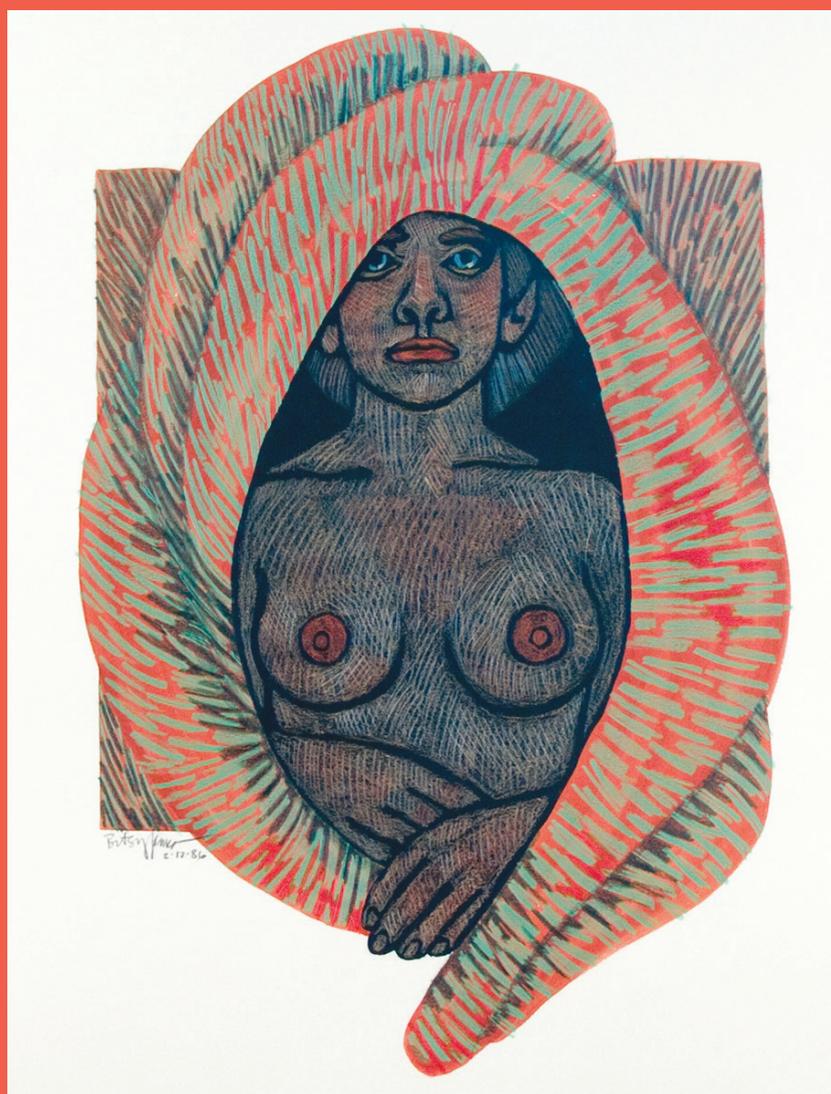
A LITERARY
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#221 Woman Rising



Betsy James



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Betsy James

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In This Issue

🌀 “I Begin to Meet You at Last”: On the Tiptree-Russ-Le Guin Correspondence

by Julie Phillips

This was a talk given at the University of Oregon, December 4, 2015, at a symposium to honor the life and work of Alice B. Sheldon and celebrate the donation of her papers to the University of Oregon Libraries.

Thank you for inviting me to speak, and let me just say how great it is that you've all come together for Alice Sheldon this year, the 100th anniversary of her birth. I'm especially pleased to be at an event in honor of the Alice Sheldon papers. They've been donated by Jeff Smith, who did a terrific job of keeping them all these years, and putting together editions of Alli's work, and loaning them to me to write Alli's life story. I know I became very possessive about her papers while I was working on them, so I can imagine how hard it must be for Jeff to give them up—Jeff is now making crying faces in the audience—and I hope the University of Oregon appreciates his gift.

The papers are especially important because Alice Sheldon's entire impersonation of a male writer went on on paper. It went on in the fiction she wrote as James Tiptree Jr. and also a few important stories she wrote under a female pseudonym, Raccoona Sheldon. And it went on in pages and pages of correspondence with other writers. Alli's papers are the place where Tiptree lives.

Apparently archival research is the hot thing in academia right now. Students and scholars have taken a new interest in letters and diaries and the private discourse that goes on underneath and around the public story. Archives are full of discussions that are taking place below the radar and outside the official view. I was just talking to Timmi Duchamp about what she called “the amazing power of conversation to shift your perspective.” And that's it exactly; that's what letters can do.

So when I heard this about archives I immediately said, yes, of course, women, and LGBT people, and so on. But it's also true of another, particularly verbal

and talkative group of outsiders: science fiction writers and fans. Unofficial communication is important to all these groups, not only because it's beautiful and fun and lively and sometimes extremely funny, but also because it can help you learn to be yourself. It seems to me that's the story of science fiction: it's the literature of imagination, but also the literature of loneliness, of alienation, and of connection. If you're not like other people, and you can't imagine what it might be like to be you, you've never seen yourself reflected anywhere, you're wondering what planet you'd have to go to to discover like minds, that's when you start trying to dream up new possibilities. And if you're lucky, you can find other people who can tell you something about who you are.

Within that conversation, I want to talk in particular about three writers whose lives were connected with each other's through the letters that are here. Three writers who never met but who knew each other intimately through their letters. I hope the University realizes just how lucky they are to have the papers not only of Alice Sheldon, but also of two other great writers, Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin.

Alice Sheldon, also known as Alli, also known as Tip, also known as James Tiptree Jr. Born in 1915, she was an African explorer, a debutante, a painter, an army officer in the Second World War, a chicken farmer, a research psychologist, and finally, became a published science fiction writer under the name of a jar of jam.

From a young age, she'd felt herself to be different from everyone else, being bright and imaginative and also falling into hopeless love affairs with other girls—one of whom died from a botched abortion, just as Alli herself nearly died. She'd been well-liked, and very pretty—which creates its own problems—and she learned to use her looks as a mask for her differences, which served her fairly well until at fifty-two she wound up, by

Alli's papers are the place where Tiptree lives.

[A]rchival research is the hot thing in academia right now. Students and scholars have taken a new interest in letters and diaries and the private discourse that goes on underneath and around the public story.

...that's the story of science fiction: it's the literature of imagination, but also the literature of loneliness, of alienation, and of connection.

Cont. on p. 2

I Begin to Meet You
at Last
(Cont. from p. 1)

Ursula never transformed herself into a man, but for a long time the main characters of her stories were all men.

When [Joanna] and Tip started corresponding, in 1973, she was a committed feminist and of the three she was the most determined to find out what it meant to write in a female voice.

accident on purpose you might say, taking the intellectual role of a man. Her performance as James Tiptree Jr. went on for about ten years, from 1967 to 1977, and during that time she wrote fan letters to, and started corresponding with, a number of her colleagues, especially Russ and Le Guin.

Ursula Le Guin was born in 1929. She grew up in Berkeley, California, where I think she must have absorbed science fiction in the atmosphere. In the seventies, after a visit to her family, she wrote to a friend, “I don’t understand how anybody who has ever lived in California can ask me where I get my crazy ideas from. Science Fiction is *far* behind Berkeley.”¹

Like Alli, she wasn’t at home in the world; she called high school a “Siberia” of mysterious social codes.² She was at home in her family, but there was a certain amount of competition between her and her three older brothers—all four blessed with great intellectual gifts and not shy about expressing them—and she grew up determined to hold her own.

Ursula never transformed herself into a man, but for a long time the main characters of her stories were all men. It had to do with a distance she needed between her life and her fiction, but it also had to do with her sense of what heroes could do, and what heroines couldn’t. The fiction that was being written by women in the 1950s was alien to her, and feeling alienated from a woman’s voice, she ended up, like Alice Sheldon, writing from a male point of view.

She and Tip started corresponding in 1971, after Tip sent her a fan letter. They communicated in part by exchanging jokes. They loved playing around with each other’s names—Tiptree becomes “Tree,” Ursula becomes “Bear”—and Ursula sent him cartoons and drawings to cheer him up. But the main thing was the support they gave each other as intellectual women. There were very few women writing science fiction then, and very few

1 Le Guin to Virginia Kidd, 18 April 1978.

2 Le Guin, Ursula K. “My Libraries.” In *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*. Boston: Shambhala, 2004, 21.

people in science fiction with the range of interests that they had, who could go from Philip K. Dick to Virginia Woolf and back in the blink of a paragraph.

Tip tended to put Ursula on a pedestal, and he certainly wasn’t alone in this. While she was wrestling with the problem of feminist anger, she wrote to Tip “I find [...] that to some portions of our dear mutual Readership I have come to represent Refinement, with a touch of Motherhood. Le Guin is the kind of sf writer it is safe to give your aunt for Christmas. Jesus. Better, perhaps, they should know the ugly truth. Some aunts are safe with me, others not. Bears just *look* cuddly.”³

Joanna Russ, the youngest of the three, was born in 1937, a child of the 1950s. Like Alli Sheldon she was an only child; like all three women she grew up very bright and with a feeling of being isolated and unrecognized. She was a senior in high school at sixteen, when she was a finalist in the Westinghouse Science Talent Search for 1953. At the awards ceremony in Washington, she remembered saying to some of her fellow finalists, “Even if we don’t know what electrons are doing, it’s a comfort to know that *they* know, don’t you think?” and suddenly realizing with a terrible feeling that even here no one else could make sense of what she’d said.⁴

When she and Tip started corresponding, in 1973, she was a committed feminist and of the three she was the most determined to find out what it meant to write in a female voice. She was immensely good at tossing out ideas, though she could be very angry, too. She was a kind of brilliant loose cannon, partly I think because it just seemed so impossible to her to be a woman and an intellectual, at least in her public life as a professor.

Every woman in academia I know has had in some way to give up being female (this means various things) in order to be a scholar, or

3 Le Guin to Tiptree, 23 March 1975.

4 Russ, Joanna. *What Are We Fighting For?: Sex, Race, Class, and the Future of Feminism*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998, xv.

intellectual, or even artist. I gave it up very young, not even understanding what was going on in words—but by 14 I knew that popularity, love, admiration, etc. etc. was not for me. The price was too high. [...] I have been told by a colleague that I was an honorary male (!), and that “Of course your sex doesn’t affect your teaching.”

No, of course not; it’s this nasty, furtive little vice I practice on my off-hours.⁵

So here we are with these literary exchanges, letter-writing being also the kind of vice one practices on one’s off-hours. And I feel like I should talk about the differences between a letter on paper and electronic communication, and the way letters create a community that’s different from online communities, and anonymity online versus anonymity by mail. But that’s someone else’s essay, and I hope one of you will write it. Actually what I really wanted to do with my time up here was read all the parts of the letters that I couldn’t fit in elsewhere, all the funny bits, like Joanna wondering why men would like vampire movies, and Tiptree’s brilliant comments on literature, and so on. Or I thought I would stand up here and do a PowerPoint of Ursula’s cartoons.

But as I was rereading the letters I realized there’s a story I didn’t really deal with in my book on Tiptree, or not enough. It’s about who you are when you’re corresponding—and of course letters are as potentially dishonest a form as any other. You’re always using a persona when you’re writing, and there’s a certain amount of distortion for effect, especially with writers, and the story that is told to an audience of one may not be the complete story. But the story I want to tell you here—and it’s an unofficial story, full of outtakes and digressions—is about who your friends can help you to become, when you’re alone and don’t know what to say or which self to be.

After the revelation of her identity, Alice Sheldon was trying to write as

5 Russ to Tiptree, 18 September 1973.

“herself” and wondering what that might mean. Of course “being yourself” is one of those mysterious things. I think one reason people respond so strongly to Alli Sheldon’s life is that a lot of people have been in that place. They’ve been in a situation where they’re trying to figure out their identity and they don’t always have a lot to go on. Or they have a lot of different selves to draw on—and those are the people who end up becoming great writers, and of course great biography subjects. There’s nothing more wonderful to write and think about than a complex, contradictory personality. But they don’t necessarily have an easy time of it in life.

And if you’re a student, and you’re wrestling with this question, which you almost certainly are, I should warn you that you’re never going to get it figured out, and it doesn’t go away. And that’s not a bad thing, because it’s kind of at the core of living, but there are times when it isn’t easy.

Alice Sheldon dealt with “being herself” by becoming someone else, Tiptree, in her letters and her fiction. After nearly ten years of more and more intense correspondence and more elaborate impersonation, it didn’t fit her very well.⁶ But after the revelation (for lack of a better word), at the end of 1976, Alli Sheldon really felt like she didn’t have any self left at all. It happened at the same time as the death of her mother, and her death and Tiptree’s death, or departure, or unmasking left Alli stuck with what felt like nothing. She felt like the writing was gone and here she was in real life,

6 Joanna, who had an uncanny ability to see through Tiptree straight to Alli without knowing she was doing it, got into a discussion of secret identities in which she wrote to Tip: “The really awful thing about having a cover, I should think, is that you must *be* it (in order not to betray it) so it ends up being not an act but a schizoid split in your very soul.” (24 November 1973).

...the story I want to tell you here—and it’s an unofficial story, full of outtakes and digressions—is about who your friends can help you to become, when you’re alone and don’t know what to say or which self to be.

There’s nothing more wonderful to write and think about than a complex, contradictory personality. But they don’t necessarily have an easy time of it in life.

I Begin to
Meet You at Last
(Cont. from p. 3)

"Everything I said was true—all the feelings are still there—yet some mold is broken and a new one yet to form."
(Tiptree to Le Guin)

"nothing but an old lady in Virginia."⁷
She wrote to Ursula:

My "real," daily-life self is a long-elaborated kind of animated puppet show, with its own validity to be sure—it gets married and holds jobs and does things like that [...]—but those 8 years in sf was the first time I could be *really* real. [...] Now all that is gone, and I am back with the merry dumb-show as life, and it doesn't much suit.⁸

For a long time Alli struggled with depression, and her health, and her husband's health, and with a lot of other practical problems, like their house, which was falling apart, and the demands of her mother's estate. (I tell you all this because some people who read the book think, "Oh, her identity was revealed and then she got depressed and committed suicide," and it wasn't like that.) She had heart surgery, and that interrupted her correspondence for a long time.

But a couple of years after the revelation Alli and Ursula, in their letters, started working at picking up the thread between them. Alli wrote Ursula that she didn't know what to write, or in what tone, or even on what stationery. She complained about the clumsiness of age and said: "It's so odd writing you as me—'just another woman'—with all that somehow implies. Everything I said was true—all the feelings are still there—yet some mold is broken and a new one yet to form. [...] Who is she? Who am I? *Do we correspond?*"⁹ She worried that Ursula would never trust her again.

Ursula wrote her back saying not to worry, "You aren't the person who wrote me—but I'm not the person who wrote *you*, either, so we proceed (as always) from here. No?—But my dear Alice please stop pulling *age* on me!! I'll be 50 in October and I get my god damn period every 3 weeks *for* 3 weeks (now

there's something I would not have told James) and quite often feel as old as anybody *need* feel and twice as tired!"¹⁰

And in the rest of the letter she wrote about things she was doing, told about her mother, who was then going through her last illness, and invited Alli into her life. Alli responded with sympathy and with delight at the renewed warmth. "Your letter was [...] spring rain after a drought so long I had forgot to feel parched. And the pleasure— Do you know, I believe I begin to meet you at last?"¹¹

And before you know it the two of them are discussing the use of the present tense in fiction, and Ursula's reading of Lukacs, and the rise of Margaret Thatcher, and cats, they're making language jokes and brainstorming titles for Alli's new novel. And Alli was able to transform what I think must have been real love, in-love-with love for Ursula into deep sympathy and concern.

Alli had always seen talking as a woman as a genuinely different mode of communication, and being female as being a persona in its own right. In a letter to Ursula in 1980 she asked:

Do you have the problem, when chatting seriously with someone (I'm sure I can't imagine chatting with no one—or can I? [...]) that your mind contains not only the main stream of converse, but a sort of ever-changing scenic panorama of asides, associations, peripheral qualifiers, etc. etc., much of which comes across naturally in speech, especially with women, who are infinitely better conversers, but which make trouble on the printed page? A lot of it is junk, of course [...] but a certain quantity *is* necessary for the larger accuracies.¹²

By "larger accuracies" she said she meant the "truth-in-context," "the quality of the emotional rapport." In other words, all this digression and joking around is important; it isn't an aside to the story, it *is* the story. What Alli re-

...all this digression and joking around is important; it isn't an aside to the story, it is the story.

7 Sheldon, Alice B. "A Woman Writing Science Fiction." In Dupont, Denise, ed. *Women of Vision: Essays by Women Writing Science Fiction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988, 52.

8 Sheldon to Le Guin, 23 April 1977.

9 Sheldon to Le Guin, 14 April 1979.

10 Le Guin to Sheldon, 19 April 1979.

11 Sheldon to Le Guin, 23½ April 1979.

12 Sheldon to Le Guin, 16 August 1980

ally means is that she refuses to see her gender or her sexuality as “furtive little vices that she practices in her off-hours.” This was at a time when both she and Ursula were rethinking their writing, and were having a difficult time with it. Ursula was just starting to turn to feminism, and to explore what writing as a woman might mean for her work. And in this they were able to see each other, partially, but nonetheless, to meet each other at last and to talk about what it might mean to be the Other, writing.

So this is my problem in talking to you, because how can I convey the importance of this correspondence without myself becoming parenthetical, without telling you all the junk that’s so important for the larger accuracies? The junk *is* the selves, or maybe it’s what rubs off when the selves scrape against each other; it’s the funny bits and the asides that go straight to your heart. It’s the junk that’s so valuable that it’s preserved in boxes in a climate controlled room, to be studied by students who will determine its value for future generations.

The other person with whom Alli went on sharing all this essential “junk” is Joanna Russ. Joanna, in letters, is a difficult character, with a lot of anger, which did a lot of real damage, to Ursula among others. Yet the anger is part of the way Joanna can recognize Alli’s experience. Where Alli directs her anger inward, Joanna gives her a model for turning it outward, and for using the imagination to transform situations and points of view. What I mean is, in one of her earliest letters to Tiptree she fantasizes about turning on one’s oppressors, “like the rat who runs up the broom handle (they do this) when you’re trying to hit it. I like rats and bats (who are not only mice, but they *fly*). Imagine a mamma bat saying to baby bat: ‘Show your teeth, dear. Look rabid. That’s right.’”¹³

And Joanna didn’t have the problem that Alli and Ursula had of being cautious around difficult subjects. She waded right in, with an honesty and a

directness that made it possible for her to address some of Alli’s dilemmas, and show her that they were shared dilemmas, that Alli wasn’t alone, and to talk about what might be the path forward to being or becoming oneself.

I want to finish up with one exchange between Alli and Joanna that took place in 1980, nearly four years after the big reveal and seven years before Alli, worn out by bad health and depression, committed suicide. Alli had written to Joanna saying,

It occurred to me to wonder if I ever told you in so many words that I too am a Lesbian—or at least as close as one can come to being one never having had a successful love with any of the women I’ve loved, and being now too old and ugly to dare try. Oh, had 65 years been different! I like some men a lot, but from the start, before I knew anything, it was always girls and women who lit me up.¹⁴

Joanna responded with a nine-page letter, and here’s some of what she said:

I’ve been reading your letter and crying, on and off. I’m very moved. No, you never told me. I always wondered, though—first of all because I find you very beautiful in your photographs, in that high-handed sort of way I love in women. I mean you look *real* and full of Tiptreeness. As well as, objectively, quite lovely, something I know you’ll never believe.

Joanna also mentions the attractiveness of Tiptree’s female characters, and Tiptree’s “amazing facility at male impersonation”—except that he was a man who was too good to be true. “I was madly in love with Tiptree and sensed uneasily that this was odd, since no real man, and no real man as truly revealed in literature has ever had that effect on me of intimacy and ‘I know *you*.’”

Alli’s depressions also made her suspect, she said.

I think I asked you once point-blank about the connection between

The junk is the selves, or maybe it’s what rubs off when the selves scrape against each other; it’s the funny bits and the asides that go straight to your heart.

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13 Russ to Tiptree, 18 September 1973.

14 Sheldon to Russ, 25 September 1980.

I Begin to Meet You
at Last
(Cont. from p. 5)

*This is the value of
correspondence...
It's about refusing to
divide up human feelings,
refusing to separate the
personal from the official,
celebrating the way people
live and love each other
and drive each other crazy.*

*I think one thing everyone
loves so much about Alice
Bradley Tiptree Sheldon
is that she used her
pseudonym for good.*

Julie Phillips is a book critic and the author of the NBCC and Hugo Award-winning *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*. She lives in Amsterdam, where she's working on a book about writing and mothering, to be called *The Baby on the Fire Escape*.

Lesbianism and depression and you said Mmfp wmpf murble yes no never mind.

The terrible thing is how all this is *hidden from us*—what *is* a Lesbian anyhow? It's unthinkable, invisible, ridiculous, Somebody Else, duck-tail haircuts and leather jackets, all that nonsense. [...]

Dear Tip, have you any IDEA of the women all over the U.S. of A. who would trample each other into mulch just for a chance to kiss your toes?

And then Joanna confessed that she herself had really had very little experience with women in bed.

It takes such a lot of WORK!!! First there are the decades of finding out—making headway against the whole world, it seems—and then the decade finding out What To Do (which depends entirely on one's circumstances and what year it is) [...] and then learning that sex isn't all that crucial. We're so surrounded with ersatz images that the real thing has to be disentangled utterly—and it *is* important, to know and feel it, but so unimportant to live up to all that magazine-y, book-y, movie stuff. [...] If I go to my grave celibate, at least I'll be *me* and have the kind of friendships with women that sexuality *makes possible*.

[...] Erotics *is* important, I guess. To dive down into the bottom of it and come up with a silly smile on one's face, saying Burble. And then sink to the bottom and lie there twiddling one's toes, a small chain of bubbles rising...

[...] *I didn't know*. I followed women all over and loved women and was jealous and anxious and in love and *still* didn't know!

[...] Oh, yes, I know those woman-woman loves: just absolutely right and recognizable, something inside that says "*I know*" in the

face of suppression and confusion. Which is a gift.

[...] I'm so glad you wrote me and so moved. [...] A world that slices up human feelings into separate parts and sticks them in compartments marked "personal," "impersonal," "normal," "abnormal"—all that nonsense! Well, it's bad.¹⁵

This is the value of correspondence, of all the asides and the humor and the sudden flashes of insight. It's about refusing to divide up human feelings, refusing to separate the personal from the official, celebrating the way people live and love each other and drive each other crazy.

Pseudonyms have so many uses, and not all of them are harmless. We've seen a lot of examples of that online lately. Another name can provide a safe cover for cruelty and slander. Another self can let a troll express the unacceptable, and not only to the outside world; I imagine it makes a safe compartment in the psyche for hate—oh, no, all that hating is just a thing this other person does; it isn't really me. When anonymity is magnified by the echo chamber, it can enable anything from Occupy to Gamergate.

I think one thing everyone loves so much about Alice Bradley Tiptree Sheldon is that she used her pseudonym for good. She used it to escape from a place in which she wasn't being seen as herself. She became another to say something about that self, and in keeping her letters she offered her conversations to us, her readers, so we can meet her, and ourselves, at last.

Note: Permission for publication of the correspondence has been given by Ursula K. Le Guin, the estate of Joanna Russ, the estate of James Tiptree Jr, and the University of Oregon Libraries as owners of the physical property rights to the collection: Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries.

15 Russ to Sheldon, 29 September 1980.

Men Who Aren't Crazy

by Sonya Taaffe

Your father, the doctor,
a rational man
from his stethoscope to his scalpel,
crisp as a hospital jacket,
hearty as a cold plunge,
impermeable as a padded door.
Your fiancé, the man-about-town,
so well-versed in the vagaries of women
he offered London
with all its back streets and night fogs
as carelessly to your blood-trance
as his own white-collared throat.
Your guest, the professor,
prescribing counter-charms
like laws of science,
for every shadow its wolfsbane,
for every mist its cross,
for every mystery its stake.
No wonder you did not scream
the night you woke to find him
drifting through your room
like a lost haunting,
the lunatic in his shirtsleeves
who grinned like a death's-head
and sobbed like a broken-hearted boy
and held out his wrists
as candidly as pouring a drink.
What had you to fear
from a man who knew without asking
how eyes could turn to lips
and dreams to hunger
no invalid's broth could ease?
Even now, instead of lilies
in the sanitarium's graveyard,
you leave him bones of small things
that once held blood—
when all the men around you
made decisions for your life,
the madman
watched the moon set over the lawn,
talked of ghost ships,
mourned for his lost spiders,
and asked if you had ever kept a cat.

Sonya Taaffe's short fiction and award-winning poetry have appeared in multiple venues. Her latest collection is *Ghost Signs*. She is currently a senior poetry editor for *Strange Horizons*.

Poetess Strikes Again

by Gwynne Garfinkle

"Scholars Discover New Poems from
Ancient Greek Poetess Sappho"—
The Daily Beast, January 28, 2014

there's that word again
word that starts like spit and ends
with a pretended caress

word to cut a giant down to size
The Incredible Shrinking Poetess

okay, word, go through your dance
riffle through her pages
cross out, rip out whatever bits don't fit

paint the claws of a lioness with pearly
pink polish, just try it
glue taffeta onto a marble goddess's
breasts and hips

efface her
if you can reach her face
or stuff her into your poetess box
and watch her spring free

The Goddess of the Unseen

by Neile Graham

I want to see inside
the leaves, their dark wet
unders the inners, the bones
of their hands. Inside
their green, their brown/orange/red
their cell linings, the space
between their atoms that
theoretically could walk through me
I want to see what holds
them up what glues
them together. Me up.
You together.

Gwynne Garfinkle lives in Los Angeles. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in such publications as *Strange Horizons*, *Interfictions*, *Mythic Delirium*, *inkscrawl*, and *The Mammoth Book of Dieselpunk*. She is working on a book of poems inspired by classic films, TV, and pop culture.

Neile Graham's life is full of writing and writers. A graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, she currently serves as their workshop director. Her poetry collections include *Spells for Clear Vision* and *Blood Memory*, and a spoken word CD.

⚙️ Toward a Feminist Masculinity

by Daniel Abraham

The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love, by bell hooks.
Washington Square Press, 2004. Reprint. \$15.95, paperback, \$11.99, ebook.

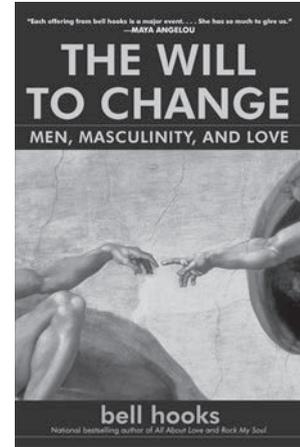
...hooks takes the tools of feminist analysis and turns them to the subjects of men and masculinity...

The process of training boys to be men in the patriarchal system, hooks says, is exquisitely cruel.

One of the structural ironies of human interaction is that the people most intimately engaged in a struggle—those best informed and with an understanding that is most deeply considered and tested—are often the easiest to dismiss as arguing to their own self-interest. People who are able to clearly and thoughtfully advocate for those unlike themselves—the man who speaks out for the autonomy of women, the white person who stands against white supremacy, the oil company executive who calls for renewable energy, the Wall Street trader who demands more regulation, etc.—are more difficult to dismiss because the arguments they make don't appear to be to their immediate advantage. This is why bell hooks is able to be such a powerful advocate for men.

In *The Will to Change*, with a rare and powerful compassion hooks takes the tools of feminist analysis and turns them to the subjects of men and masculinity and of how traditional patriarchy degrades both individuals and the cultural narratives that surround them. She acknowledges the reputation feminism has gained—often, but not always, undeservedly—of casting men in the role of the enemy and then takes her stand against the exclusion and denigration of men by the patterns and customs of patriarchy. She explicitly says that the book is “about our need to live in a world where women and men can belong together.”

Throughout *The Will to Change*, she draws from her experiences with men who were in relationships that should have been expected to be loving: her father, her brother, her boyfriend. She talks about her experiences as a teacher whose students bring their reports of their own fathers and brothers and lovers and selves. She uses all of this and her own long experience as an intellectual and social critic to illuminate the ways



that patriarchal norms cultivate fear and violence in men.

And, bravely, hooks implicates the ways in which early feminists, including herself, failed to address the deformations that patriarchy visits upon men. “Despite all the expressed feminist longing for men of feeling, when men worked to get in touch with their feelings, no one really wanted to reward them. In feminist circles men who wanted to change were often labeled narcissistic or needy.”

Hooks addresses the experience of being a boy naively born into a patriarchal system, violence as an integral part of the cultural experience of masculinity, popular images and models of manhood, and the overburdening of male sexuality.

The process of training boys to be men in the patriarchal system, hooks says, is exquisitely cruel. She considers the process of taking fully human, rich-hearted boys, creating a test of manhood that haunted the men hooks speaks for, and “the moment that they were compelled to give up their right to feel, to love in order to take their place as patriarchal men.” Through religious tradition, through patterns of generational violence, through the punishment by other men and the contempt of women trained to expect emotional numbness,

hooks argues, boys are taught that they must narrow themselves emotionally in exchange for safety and become in turn the guards in their own prisons. When addressing violence, hooks pulls no punches. She outlines the tremendous price that male violence exacts, both on women and children and between men. The training of boys into violence is, she argues, so pervasive as to be invisible.

The exceptions made allowing men to express and experience emotion—anger and sexual desire—leave men ill-equipped to have a fully human life. Anger is forced to do double or triple duty as an expression not only of rage but also of grief and despair. Sexual desire is called on to carry not just healthy lust, but any kind of longing, frustration or need, and when sexual release does not answer the underlying and incoherent needs it's called on to satisfy, there is no other healthy, humane outlet.

But hooks does see an alternative. Even within the small sample of her own family, the impulse toward love and away from the standard deformations of patriarchy does sometimes win through. "Ultimately the men who choose against violence, against death, do so because they want to live fully and well, because they want to know love. These are the men who are true heroes, the men whose lives we need to know about, honor and remember."

The Will to Change is a difficult book. But it is written clearly, accessibly, and with a depth of feeling and personal experience that are hard to look away from. The experience of men is not a subject that is often treated with both deep compassion and critical intelligence. The author's analysis is powerful, and speaking as someone whose life experience overlaps with Dr. hooks' very little, I found the world she describes profoundly recognizable. I, for one, believe she's carved our culture at the joints.

The vision of an anti-patriarchal masculinity that hooks builds toward is, I think, still in its infancy. Many issues that hooks raises in the book—homosexuality and masculinity, the part played by women in enforcing tradi-

tional male roles, the question of what, if anything, exists in patriarchal masculinity that is not simply violence—deserve much more discussion than any single volume can offer. It's not her job to do it all. That she has shown feminism as a pathway to a full, healthy, loving, nurturing masculinity is a great kindness, and important not only to the experience of men but also to the long-term success of feminism as a civilizing force in human culture.

Anyone who is or loves a man—brother, father, friend, lover, or son—would do well to sit with hooks for a few hours and imagine with her how revolutionary it might be for men to be healed too.

Award winning and NYT bestselling author and television producer Daniel Abraham also writes as MLN Hanover and the James half of James SA Corey. He has twenty-three books in print and over forty published short stories.

...she's carved our culture at the joints.

That she has shown feminism as a pathway to a full, healthy, loving, nurturing masculinity is a great kindness.

☞ An Outcast Romance Facing the Apocalypse
All the Birds in the Sky, by Charlie Jane Anders, Tor Books,
January 2016, 313 pp., \$25.99, hardcover, \$12.99 e-book.

reviewed by S. Qiouyi Lu

Anders does a masterful job of showing both the humor and the sadness inherent in growing up in difficult situations....

All the Birds in the Sky is many things: it's a love story, an apocalyptic tale, and a coming of age novel. But readers going in expecting a classic story of the destruction of the Earth will be disappointed; the novel isn't structured with the apocalypse at its core. Nor does it feel like the apocalypse is meant to be the main event. Instead, the relationship between Patricia Delfine and Laurence Armstead is the true center of the story.

Patricia and Laurence are childhood friends—or perhaps it's more accurate to say that they're childhood misfits who found company in each other. Considered outcasts by the other students at school, the two of them seem to understand each other, though they're reluctant at first to form a friendship. Even so, they keep spending time with each other, and their relationship deepens. They find their aptitudes: Laurence is fascinated by technology, whereas Patricia explores magic, which she discovered through a number of strange encounters. But, while mentors encourage Laurence's interest in science, and while Patricia is enthusiastic about helping Laurence with his supercomputer project, Patricia finds that her own powers only cause her isolation and misunderstanding: when she shows Laurence that she can talk to cats, Laurence panics and runs away from her.

After a period of separation and the end of their tumultuous childhoods, Patricia and Laurence find each other again as young adults in the “hipster mecca” of San Francisco. Patricia, a graduate of the Eltisle Maze school of magic, has developed her magical skills and become much more powerful. Laurence has become a technological whiz kid, part of a prestigious “ten percent group” that is working on a massive technological innovation. Science and magic are established in the narrative as opposites, and



Patricia and Laurence are embodiments of that conflict. Various forces conspire to pull Laurence and Patricia apart. Yet the two find themselves drawn to each other again and again, even forming a romantic relationship. At the end of the book, a cataclysmic event pushes them together once more as the world hurtles toward apocalypse. Together, they face the destruction of the Earth and struggle to find a solution.

Anders's writing is brilliant. There's such a strong voice through *All the Birds in the Sky*, and Anders does a masterful job of showing both the humor and the sadness inherent in growing up in difficult situations: “[Patricia’s parents] locked Patricia in her room for a week, sliding food under her door. The bottom of the door tended to scrape off the top layer of whatever type of food it was. Like if it was a sandwich, the topmost piece of bread was taken away by the door. You don’t really want to eat a sandwich after your door has had the first bite[.]” Even as the narrative darkens, Anders continues to inject moments of humor, which never feel misplaced. The youthful voices of Patricia and Laurence are distinct and three-dimensional. Even the most minor characters have their own personalities and quirks that make them feel like they’re fully realized people.

Although the main focus of *All the Birds in the Sky* is character and relationship development, an undercurrent of commentary on gender runs throughout the story. Laurence, a boy, gets involved with technology, and Patricia, a girl whose core strength is empathy, gets involved with magic. Rather than

feeling stereotypical, though, these assignments become a backdrop to critique: we see Laurence coasting through life and being encouraged at every step to pursue his dreams, whereas Patricia's experiences are denied, and her natural talents suppressed again and again. Laurence is permitted the room to develop an ego, whereas Patricia is chastised for "Aggrandizement," magic users' term for mistakenly believing oneself to be more important than others. At the same time, we see Laurence's flaws and Patricia's strengths. Anders writes a complex narrative that reflects the contemporary suppression of feminine-coded traits in our culture and society while challenging it.

Although focused on two people, *All the Birds in the Sky* dares to be epic in

scope. It's difficult to fully describe the narrative because Anders touches on so many topics, yet combines them seamlessly into an engaging story. Autonomy and service, love and friendship, nature and nurture, science and the natural, philosophy and humor all weave together into a beautiful story, its iterations as myriad as all the birds that fly throughout its pages.

Although focused on two people, All the Birds in the Sky dares to be epic in scope.

S. Qiouyi Lu is a writer, artist, narrator, and translator whose work has appeared in *Clarkesworld* and *inkscrawl*. They enjoy destroying speculative fiction as a dread member of the queer Asian SFFH illuminati. S. lives in Ohio with a tiny black cat named Thin Mint.



Cottonwood, Betsy James

⚙️ A Major '60s SF Critic Gets Her Due

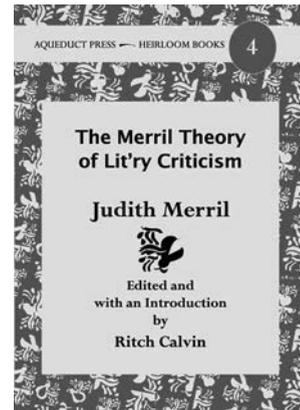
The Merrill Theory of Lit'ry Criticism, by Judith Merrill, edited by Ritch Calvin, Aqueduct Press, March 2016, 360 pp., \$22, trade paperback, \$8.95 e-book.

reviewed by Michael Levy

For years I used Merrill's reviews as a buying guide, and her anthologies gave me practically my first access to the fiction of Ballard, Aldiss, Disch, Ellison, and the exciting world of New Wave science fiction.

I kind of grew up with Judith Merrill. For a major writer at a time when major writers were supposed to be prolific, she actually wrote relatively little, but as a voracious reader of anything science fictional in the 1960s and 1970s, I consumed the majority of her fiction, from paperback reprints of her two solo novels, *Shadow on the Hearth* (1950) and *The Tomorrow People* (1960) to *Gunner Cade* (1960), one of her two underrated collaborations with C. M. Kornbluth using their Cyril Judd pseudonym, to a variety of her short fictions, most notably her first published story, the classic "That Only a Mother" (1948), which I actually still teach in my science fiction course. But what really impressed me about Merrill was her literary criticism. I know that sounds odd considering I was a teenager, but it's true. On a momentous occasion in my youth a neighbor had hired me to help her clean out her garage, and as payment she gifted me with two large boxes containing, among other things, a nearly complete run of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. In F&SF, beginning in 1965, Merrill published her somewhat eccentric book reviews. Also in those boxes was a complete run of Merrill's The Year's Greatest Science-Fiction and Fantasy anthology series, replete with many pages of her opinions about science fiction, politics, and life in general. For years I used Merrill's reviews as a buying guide, and her anthologies gave me practically my first access to the fiction of Ballard, Aldiss, Disch, Ellison, and the exciting world of New Wave science fiction.

I'm pleased, therefore, to see this new selection of Merrill's critical work, edited by feminist science fiction scholar Ritch Calvin of Stony Brook University. Merrill's nonfiction is voluminous, however—way too much to fit in a single physical volume—so publisher Aqueduct has thoughtfully created a much larger,



online version of the book containing a more extensive sampling of Merrill's work. Anyone who purchases the physical volume receives a complimentary version of this e-text. The book is the fourth in Aqueduct's rather eclectic Heirloom Books series, which has heretofore included Suzy McKee Charnas's neglected 1986 literary fantasy, *Dorothea Dreams*, Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's obscure, late-nineteenth century feminist utopia *New Amazonia*, and talented if largely forgotten leftist SF writer Chandler Davis's collection of selected fiction and nonfiction, *It Walks in Beauty*.

The Merrill Theory of Lit'ry Criticism begins with an essay by Calvin titled "The SF Aesthetics of Judith Merrill," which gives a brief but useful overview of her life, her (at the time controversial) definition of science (or speculative) fiction, her aesthetics, and other key aspects of her critical work. It then goes on to provide three kinds of nonfiction: The introductions to Merrill's The Year's Greatest Science-Fiction and Fantasy volumes from 1956 to 1966, her monthly *F&SF* review columns from 1965 to 1969; and a number of miscellaneous pieces written for various reasons and published in varying venues; these last include essays on Theodore Sturgeon (only in the e-version) and Fritz Leiber (two authors she much admired), and a two-part essay "What Do You Mean? Science? Fiction?" that originally appeared in early

The introductions show Merrill at her conversational and sometimes thorny best, making clear her gradually evolving agenda for putting forward what she called the New Thing...

issues of the scholarly journal *Extrapolation* in 1966.

The introductions show Merrill at her conversational and sometimes thorny best, making clear her gradually evolving agenda for putting forward what she called the New Thing (which we now know as the New Wave), as the most exciting, the most aesthetically and intellectually challenging, and the highest quality sort of science fiction being produced in either England or the United States. Sometimes she talked about individual stories in these introductions, but she generally preferred to analyze genre-related trends in the publishing industry—what was new, what had gotten stale, how many venues there were for short science fiction—or just to go on about whatever she thought was important inside SF or outside of it. Her brand of leftist politics is particularly interesting.

Nearly everything that Merrill had to say is interesting, though on this re-reading, I found that what I enjoyed most were the places where she was being most contentious, playing either the controversialist or the curmudgeon, so to speak. Cases in point: In Merrill's opinion J.G. Ballard, author of *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), was clearly the best science fiction writer on the planet, being "well on his way toward becoming the first truly conscious and controlled literary artist s-f has produced" (95). She also had numerous good things to say about the work of Brian Aldiss, Cordwainer Smith, John Brunner, Roger Zelazny, Theodore Sturgeon, Richard McKenna, Harlan Ellison, John Barth, Fritz Leiber, Samuel Delany, Thomas Disch, and (interestingly enough) Clifford Simak, though even these favored writers came in for criticism when they produced a book or short story that Merrill considered to be too overtly commercial or not up to her aesthetic standards. Philip K. Dick's work went from earning high praise to receiving harsh criticism in less than a paragraph. In Merrill's opinion Frank Herbert, while he had a few neat ideas in *Dune* (1965) and worked very hard at it, basically ruined the book by

immersing those ideas in a hack-work, pulp plot: "I don't think any amount of effort or ability could have made this odd hodgepodge of concepts stick together" (133). Harlan Ellison's own take on the New Thing, as featured in his mammoth anthology *Dangerous Visions* (1967), seemed to Merrill to be very much a mixed bag and hardly as dangerous as he claimed. Frederik Pohl's work, for example the novel *A Plague of Pythons* (1965), was not without value, but was too often trivial (interestingly, Merrill had been married to Pohl from 1948 to 1952).

Also fascinating is the fact that although Merrill is generally assumed to have been a strong feminist—she certainly conducted much of her life that way—feminist politics rarely if ever appeared in her nonfiction and (as might be noted from her list of favorite writers above) she reviewed and praised very few women writers—Phyllis Gottlieb gets a brief, fairly positive mention for *Sunburst* (1965), and Zenna Henderson and a very young Ursula K. Le Guin also receive some praise.

Today Merrill, who died at the age of 74 in 1997, less than a year after being named Guest of Honor at WisCon, is not all that well remembered outside of the close-knit community of feminist SF fans. "That Only a Mother" continues to be anthologized with some regularity, however, and her novels, collections, and anthologies are generally available in used or electronic editions. Merrill's autobiography, *Better to Have Loved* (2002), co-authored with her granddaughter Emily Pohl-Weary, shows twelve new and fourteen used copies available on Amazon (order one today). And now Ritch Calvin and Aqueduct Press have given us this generous selection of her nonfiction. Merrill was at the center of one of the most exciting periods of change in our field, and her introductions and book reviews provide one of the very best records of that excitement. This is a lovely book, and belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in the history of science fiction.

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Michael Levy teaches science fiction and children's literature at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. A widely published scholar and reviewer, his books include *Children's Fantasy Literature: An Introduction*, co-authored with Farah Mendlesohn. He's past-president of both the SFRA and the IAFA.

🌀 Secret Histories of Olondria's Women

The Winged Histories, by Sofia Samatar, Small Beer Press,
March 2016, 300 pp., \$24, hardcover, \$14.95, e-book.

reviewed by Tansy Rayner Roberts

Sofia Samatar writes gorgeous prose, so lyrical and thoughtful in her choices that I am reminded of reading Patricia McKillip for the first time.

With the rise of a violent rebellion in Olondria, history is made on the battlefield as well as behind closed doors. But whose history are we reading?

The Winged Histories explores the way that the perspectives of women are often the first things to be lost (if they were recorded at all) when history pins down the “important” aspects of world events (when studying the history of women you learn early on that the definition of “important” has traditionally meant “things done by men”). The secret history of women is a theme that has always fascinated me, in historiography as well as in fiction—and it’s something that I delight in seeing expressed in the context of a fantasy world.

Sofia Samatar writes gorgeous prose, so lyrical and thoughtful in her choices that I am reminded of reading Patricia McKillip for the first time. It’s easy to be swept away by the language so thoroughly that unless you pay very close attention, the story itself can take second billing. I very much enjoyed Samatar’s debut novel, *A Stranger in Olondria*, but I often did find myself so distracted by the prettiness of it all that I failed to pay attention to what was going on in the plot.

This wasn’t the case for *The Winged Histories*, possibly because the theme is of such strong interest for me, but also because of the mosaic novel structure, which provides a solid framework to contain Samatar’s lovely prose: the text is separated into four novella-length Histories (of the Sword, of the Stone, of Music, and of Flight), each from the point of view of a different female protagonist: swordmaiden, priestess, bard, and princess.

Tavis, our first heroine, is a niece of the royal family of Olondria, who has caused a scandal by training as a soldier and serving in the military. Through Tav’s eyes we see how she navigates her liminal status as a woman as well as a



warrior—and how other people, including her fellow soldiers and their various hosts, deal with her dual nature. In the later histories we learn that Tav shares credit for the rebellion with her headstrong cousin Prince Andasya and is perceived by most (including her sister Siski, the fourth protagonist of the novel) as a bold, revolutionary warrior figure.

We meet other women along the way: Tialon of the History of the Stone, daughter and successor living in the shadow of her High Priest father’s legacy, and Seren of the History of Music whose love affair with Tav is disrupted by the greater events of the nation at war. Siski’s story is framed around the use of young royal women as political pawns, whose fates rise and fall with the status of their family. The most important woman in the story who does not narrate her own History is Mardith, Queen of Olondria and the ruthless matchmaking aunt of Tav and Siski. I would have loved to read her contribution; though it’s not like she holds back her opinion and perspective in both of the Histories presented by her nieces!

Each History revolves around a book or some other notation of events past, whether it be the volume of military philosophy that Tav holds so dear to her heart (which her aunt destroys in a fit of cruelty), Tialon’s unsettled relationship with the book documenting the greatness of her father (in which she, the unnamed daughter, is barely a footnote), Seren’s collection of songs, dances, and

Samatar’s heroines read books, write their own stories and songs, and dig their way out of the marginalia of the history that confines them.

past loves as a complex, epic oral history, or Siski's attempts to reconcile the incomplete, unsatisfying Dreved Histories—a book of portents—with what is really happening to her darling cousin/lover Dasya.

Samatar's heroines read books, write their own stories and songs, and dig their way out of the marginalia of the history that confines them. *The Winged Histories* is about how history warps and changes reality, even as words and books (and historians) try to pin down the "truth" about the world (and ultimately,

inevitably, fail to capture anything but a shadow of the real life events).

This is not a novel to be read in a hurry. It requires diligence and close attention. But there is so much to be discovered in this complex, layered, fragmented history that you might even forget (as I almost did) that Olondria is an imaginary kingdom.

This is not a novel to be read in a hurry. It requires diligence and close attention.

Tansy Rayner Roberts is a Tasmanian author, editor, and podcaster. Her published work includes *Cranky Ladies of History* (as editor), *Love & Romanpunk*, and the Hugo-winning feminist SF podcast *Galactic Suburbia*, now in its seventh year of production.

🌀 The Real West, Full of Stories

Lost Trails: Forgotten Tales of the Weird West, edited by Cynthia Ward, WolfSinger Publications, September 2015, 316 pp., \$16.95 paperback, \$5.95 e-book.

reviewed by Kristin King

When most people think of Westerns, we think of the Hollywood version, with the lone white gunman walking from an empty desert into a town of onlookers, shooting the outlaw, and moving on. That's given us potent cultural myths—of justice that's swift and fair, of the power of one individual.

Too bad that Hollywood version is a lie. The people of the real West, which runs all the way north into Canada and south through Mexico, were Native Americans, Canadian Métis (mixed) people, Chinese railroad workers and miners, runaway slaves and free blacks, prostitutes, homesteaders, grandmothers, manly men who loved other manly men, and so much more. Nobody settled an empty land: the immigrants arrived peaceably, or took over traditional lands, or engaged in bloody conquest, extermination, and forcible conversion. And in the anthology *Lost Trails: Forgotten Tales of the Weird West*, these people had different gods, spirits, and tricksters—from *La Llorona*, the Weeping Woman who preys on lonely mining men, to the Hebrew Malakhim, angels of the Lord. And Guan Yu, the Chinese God of War, who has come to the Boise Basin gold rush; the Nagual, a Mesoamerican fig-

ure with the power to transform humans into animals; and the Cree Wolverine Woman. On top of that, there are outrageous alternate histories and incursions by people from outer space, or other dimensions, or other times. And zombies heralding the Second Coming, because hey, why not?

One of the strengths of this anthology is the depth of the research that went into so many of the stories, and the ways this is combined with a twist of magic, technology, or alternate history. For example, the story "Assiniboia" by Misha Nogha plays off the life of Louis Riel, a Métis leader, founder of Manitoba, and leader of resistance movements against the Canadian government. In it, "Father Francis," a Roman Catholic priest with a striking similarity to Riel, faces a mystical confusion of identity, which not even Wolverine Woman may be able to resolve.

Then there is the alternate history "Thirteen Days of Glory" by Scott A. Cupp. What at first appears to be a standard tale of the Alamo takes a turn for the queer when the narrator joins Davy Crockett and other men in a cross-dressing defense against the Spanish Inquisition.



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Cont. on p. 16

The Real West
(Cont. from p. 15)

No matter how imaginative, any anthology of Westerns would be woefully incomplete if it didn't address the fundamental injustice upon which North America is based...

No matter how imaginative, any anthology of Westerns would be woefully incomplete if it didn't address the fundamental injustice upon which North America is based: the theft of land from the native peoples and the repeated extermination campaigns run against them. Fortunately the anthology does not flinch from that work.

Some of these stories challenge the legacy of theft, erasure, and forced assimilation of First Peoples. In "What Happened at Blessing Creek" by Naomi Kritzer, settlers come to Kansas to find that the home of Osage people is defended by dragons. And in "Soldier's Coat" by J. Comer, different tribes of Indians fight alongside different tribes of whites. Johnny, a California Indian working with the Americans as a medic's assistant, teams up with Tatyana, a Russian-speaking leader of the Aleut, to capture a giant cannon. Their joint plan is to take on the whites' ways, but without giving up their own. As Tatyana puts it, "Water sprinkled on you does not make spirits go away."

Another injustice was the violent extraction of natural resources—for example, the search for gold referred to in "How Five-Gashes-Tumbling Chaneco Earned the Nickname" by Rudy Ch. Garcia. In this satirical, slapstick tale, the narrator explains his desertion from the expedition of Conquistador Don Juan de Oñate—a man who, in his search for the fabled city of gold, found it expedient to cut off the feet of every adult male in Acoma Pueblo and enslave its women.

In extreme contrast, the sweet love story "Midnight at the Lariat Lounge" by Kathleen Alcalá features an outer-space uranium speculator, who arrives during a 1980s bust period and extracts that hot commodity by...paying for it.

Overall, this anthology is a dazzling array of stories that took me on a fulfilling historical and emotional journey. I enjoyed it all, but there is a special place in my heart for the outrageous final story, "Pancho Villa's Flying Circus" by Ernest Hogan. On seeing the title I figured I was in for a madcap adventure, and I was right. It's the kind of tall tale where

Tesla invents a death ray, then complains to General Villa that it's being misused because it was intended to make war impossible. Then a soldier named Alejandro proceeds to hijack the narrative and the airship *Cucaracha* to strike at the true heart of America: Hollywood.

And why does Alejandro want to take Hollywood? "Simple. Natural. Hollywood had taken something that belonged to me, and I wanted it back."

Never mind Hollywood. That "empty" desert? It's full of stories.

Kristin King is the author of the short story collection *Misfits from the Beehive State* (2013). Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Calyx*, *The Pushcart Prize XXII*, and the anthology *Missing Links and Secret Histories* (2013). She blogs at kristinking.wordpress.com.

Overall, this anthology is a dazzling array of stories that took me on a fulfilling historical and emotional journey.

🌀 Trash Wars and Radical Mythmaking

Damnificados, by JJ Amaworo Wilson, PM Press, January 2016,
274 pp., \$15.95, paperback, \$8.95, e-book.

reviewed by Victoria Elisabeth Garcia

Damnificados is a strikingly fresh, powerful, and singularly engaging new work by first-time novelist JJ Amaworo Wilson. Set in Favelada, an imaginary, polyglot city where poverty is ubiquitous, conflicts over garbage often end in death, and magic is a rare but expected aspect of everyday existence, *Damnificados* follows the trials and triumphs of a group of squatters who take over an abandoned skyscraper and build new lives for themselves. With prose at once vivid, direct, and elegant, *Damnificados* is a quick and engrossing read. This, coupled with its celebration of resistance, difference, and intentional community, means the book will appeal mightily to many *Cascadia Subduction Zone* readers.

From the very first sentence, the book fascinates and compels: Wilson is blessed with a subtle but dark sense of humor and a tantalizingly distinctive voice. While echoes of the great magic realists can be felt (Asturias, in my opinion, reverberates with particular strength), the book's sensibility and idiom are entirely Wilson's own. This kind of newness is always exciting, but it's especially impressive in a first novel.

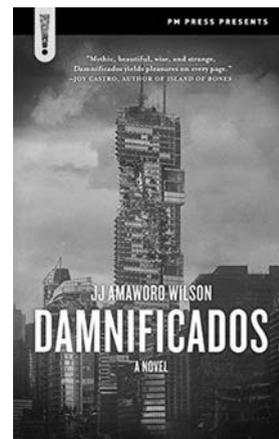
Clues to how an apparent newcomer came to create something so sharply and thoroughly unique can be found in Wilson's background: Before turning his focus to fiction, Wilson spent many years traveling the world teaching English. He has lived in numerous countries, including Columbia, Lesotho, Egypt, Germany, and Italy. And while *Damnificados* is his first novel, it is by no means his first book. Prior to this, he published over a dozen pedagogical texts about TESOL (Teaching English as a Second or Other Language). In addition to this, he is also a successful playwright, as Wilson's cosmopolitan, language-focused résumé shows.

Though Wilson's fantastical city of the poor has a decisively Latin American quality, it is peopled with a riotous

swirl of characters who, though united in poverty, come from a plethora of different backgrounds and speak a dazzling variety of languages. As a result, the book has an almost carnivalesque sense of multiplicity and abundance, which persists even as the characters face the most harrowing of tribulations—plagues of mosquitoes, military sieges, flooding, packs of feral beasts, and hunger.

The book's polyglot tone is especially well-suited to its subject matter. *Damnificados* takes obvious inspiration from Venezuela's Tower of David—a 45-story skyscraper, abandoned in 1994 before construction was complete, that became home to a highly organized group of squatters in 2007. (With electricity, running water, a number of small businesses, and a tightly regulated social order, the Tower of David existed as a thriving, if controversial, community for seven years, until the collective's eviction in the summer of 2014.) In this context, Wilson's characters' splendid array of languages, ethnicities, and backstories creates the impression of a reverse Tower of Babel: United in their experience of struggle and need, in their desire to create a home of their own, and in the depth of their differences from the dominant paradigm, the characters are able to understand and empower one another and to reinforce each other's strengths, with or without a common tongue. Because of this, despite the book's frequently abject and trash-filled milieu, it often feels thrillingly and profoundly hopeful.

Considered as an exercise in mythmaking, the book is likewise thrilling. Its focus skates easily from character to character, with long passages in the omniscient point of view. In less able hands, this might be distancing, but here it often gives the book a wondrously fractal and folkloric flavor. Wilson's take on the squatters' world is touched with absurd-



From the very first sentence, the book fascinates and compels: Wilson is blessed with a subtle but dark sense of humor and a tantalizingly distinctive voice.

Wilson's characters' splendid array of languages, ethnicities, and backstories creates the impression of a reverse Tower of Babel...

Trash Wars (Cont. from p. 17)

Wilson's take on the squatters' world is touched with absurdism and is mildly fantastical.

© 18 *By and large, males are the heroes and defenders; the ones who lead, invent, and rescue. The women, meanwhile, are far more likely to garden, forage, groom, and nurture—when they're visible at all.*

...the book's many strengths are more than sufficient to justify weathering its weaknesses.

Victoria Elisabeth Garcia's fiction has been published in *Polyphony*, the *Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Seattle with her husband, comics creator John Aegard, and a chunky but agile little dog.

ism and is mildly fantastical—a band of dangerous felons battles a village of escaped psychiatric patients, and loses; soothsayers do business in bars, while two-headed wolves roam the streets; and an epic flood leaves an inexplicable quintet of monumental stone heads in its wake—but, delightfully, the folkloric feeling persists even in parts of the narrative that aren't conspicuously strange. As a result, anecdotes about everyday privation and survival are imbued with a sense of deep, mythic power. This is yet another of the book's commanding strengths.

Alas, though the book's fantastical character gives much, it also takes something away. Over the course of the book (as one would expect) the squatters face a number of obstacles and existential threats to life, limb, and home. In the first half of the book, these are genuinely harrowing, and their solutions feel both hard-won and real. However, near the book's midpoint, an especially menacing enemy is neutralized via the surprise intervention of an apparently magical entity—and though the moment itself is luminous, evocative, and satisfying, it is nonetheless a classic *deus ex machina*, and it robs subsequent hazards of much of their impact. For this reason, though the entire book is fascinating and intensely worthwhile, the first half is far more compelling than the second.

And while it is true that the characters' quotidian moments are rendered powerfully, it must be made clear that the everyday work of community-building and squat-keeping is not the book's focus. Once it's established, the majority of the threats to the collective come from outside. We do not, as a general rule, see the hard work of consensus-building, personality management, and rule negotiation—nor do we see how the squatters deal with the sequelae of their doubtless traumatic pre-squat lives. I myself would tend to classify this as a valid, artistic choice and not a *per se* failing. Many SF-oriented readers may have a strong interest in the nuts and bolts of creating *de novo* governments (as seen in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Mars*) or in rigorous and detailed speculation about

human behavior in planned communities (as in Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* books, or B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two*), and for these folks, *Damnificados* may be a bit disappointing. (For anyone interested in the interpersonal and practical aspects of squatting, I strongly recommend Stacy Wakefield's 2014 novel, *The Sunshine Crust Baking Factory*. Though set in 1990s Brooklyn and not SFnal in any sense, it makes for a pleasing companion piece to *Damnificados*.)

Though most of the book's shortcomings are similarly minor, it does suffer from one very significant flaw, and given the book's deeply multicultural soul, it is a rather surprising one:

The vast majority of the characters in *Damnificados* are male. And while the book does include one major, self-determined female character (a volatile and highly entrepreneurial beautician) she is, for the most part, presented in terms of her romantic and sexual relationship with one of the male leads. In addition to this, labor is allocated within the collective (and, to a lesser extent, within the world as a whole) in a rather dispiriting way: By and large, males are the heroes and defenders; the ones who lead, invent, and rescue. The women, meanwhile, are far more likely to garden, forage, groom, and nurture—when they're visible at all.

Also troubling is the complete absence of characters who present as anything other than cis-gendered and heterosexual. This sort of thing would be irritating in almost any novel, but because of this book's utopian overtones, it is especially galling.

Still, despite this significant issue, the book's many strengths are more than sufficient to justify weathering its weaknesses. A fascinating work by a compelling new author, it should not be missed.

Clear-Cut Spirit Song

by Neile Graham

—for Devin—

What remains? Waste all around me
and I still stand. What am I spared for?

Spared. Which means alone, doesn't it?
Which means sole survivor. But I'm not.

We stand and stand with wastelands
between us. We stand witness to each other

standing. Though we can't reach each other.
Since the connections between us are gone.

All but the still-green and guilty wind
its fingers chilly tapping ghostly messages

on our bark-bound skin, echoes from the ones
who are gone. Who can say they've gone to waste?

In the maelstroms that cut them down.
Storms sometimes of their own making,

Sometimes the accidental anger of lives
spurned and burned and burning to fire.

To fire upon. A perfect storm: one human
and its weapons. All the various blades.

Look down. Each toe is a root, from them
tendrils seek the deepest, safest dark.

Our legs are twinned trunks, solid
and more stolid, a plinth, a pedestal.

Up, and each arm is a branch, bearing
all the weight of sap, of the air

of sprouting leaves and branching
thoughts, reaching to the sky

but not to surrender. To worship air
and light and breathing still.

It is not all stumps and slaughter.
We're scorned as timber, beloved of the sky.

But how the wind blows, love, how it blows.

We Daphnes clothe this naked hill.

The Gods of Tales

by Neile Graham

A story first formed so long ago
shaped like bear or cat or fire.

Home or shelter or fear.
That's not what matters.

The words have always shifted
like rain, spilling over the story,

soaking into it, like the teller,
stretching its bones into a

soggy new shape, or drying
like the forest in a drought year,

its skin stuck to its bones
till no one can remember it

fleshy and new. Tales wrought
by their tellers. By the listeners.

By the games the children play
as they snuggle against

their parents, all ears. The games
the parents play, as they listen

to the cut of words their lovers
mouth, lips curling, tongue clicking,

earning touch. New words, new
lies added to old to tell Truth.

It's how we describe our world
once Raven has stolen the sun,

once the bright and faery queen
has stolen her Thomas. Fire

lilies, lunar bears, elk large
as whole countries steal

into the human world.

My hand, your hand, shapes

the words, our tongues sing them
like an anthem, like a lullaby. Sleep,

sleep and dream, children.

Arise and wake and dream.

Of course we're aware of the events of our day-to-day world. But as writers and artists we learn to listen for the drama that goes on in the parallel universe of the unconscious. The unconscious is more broadly aware than the acculturated conscious mind, and because it employs intuition rather than logic it entrains with the oceanic flow of life that is the sea we swim in, and keeps us flowing with it.

The unconscious speaks to us in stories. It borrows images from experience and imagination and uses them as metaphor to play out deeper issues. An example I'm fond of:

My mother, at ninety, began to be "demented." Yet if you listened, you'd realize she was perfectly sane—she had just mislaid the collective metaphors and was using an alternate set. A few days before her death she told me happily, "I'm waiting for the train to Wales! Dad's gone ahead, and we'll meet there. But I don't have my ticket yet."

She could intuit that soon she would go where Dad had gone—but not quite yet. Her mind, as it began to unmake itself, had mislaid the "realistic" explanation (itself a metaphor) for her situation: "I'm dying." So it groped around and found another, quite creative one, a train journey, to frame the same thing.

The writer of speculative fiction deliberately invites the unconscious to dress itself from the costume-closet of metaphor and, thus made visible, to take the writer on a journey.

This practice is wonderful, terrifying, humbling.

The Morning Series

If we weren't naive we'd never risk anything. When I began to paint the images that would become *The Morning Series* and then four novels, I had no clue I was hiking off-trail into wilderness. With lions.

Naive, and stressed; at a time when life had me backed into a corner, I got reckless enough to go looking in my memory for the stories I had written as a teen and hidden in a tin box under my bed. They were full of passions, angers, and loves of which my family and society did not approve; I had hidden them, torn them up, and pushed aside even their memory, in order to "grow up and be sensible." In denying them I had denied the intensities and tasks embedded in them, and I suspected I still had a responsibility to those lost poignancies.

I wasn't a writer yet. I was a professional illustrator, so I told myself the stories in pictures. Because early morning was the only time I had to paint, I called them *The Morning Series*. I wasn't far into the project before the stories were telling me: telling me how to tell them.

It wasn't my first experience of the willing obedience that artists live for, but it was an intense one. I found I had only two rules:

1. I would ask for an image, and paint whatever I was shown. Even if it was frightening, shocking, or bizarre.

2. I would love it. I would not say of any painting, "This isn't any good." I would love each one the way I would love my child.

I worked almost every morning for two years. Three hundred and fifteen paintings.

At last I came to a stopping place. Not to an end; each lifetime has the vastness of the universe to wander in. Rather, it was as though I had been given so many stories that some of them had to expand out of the paintings and find words: at last, to be let out of the box under the bed.

They became four novels: *Long Night Dance*, *Dark Heart*, *Listening at the Gate*, and now, from Aqueduct Press, *Roadsouls*.

<http://listeningatthegate.com/>



#175: The Beast



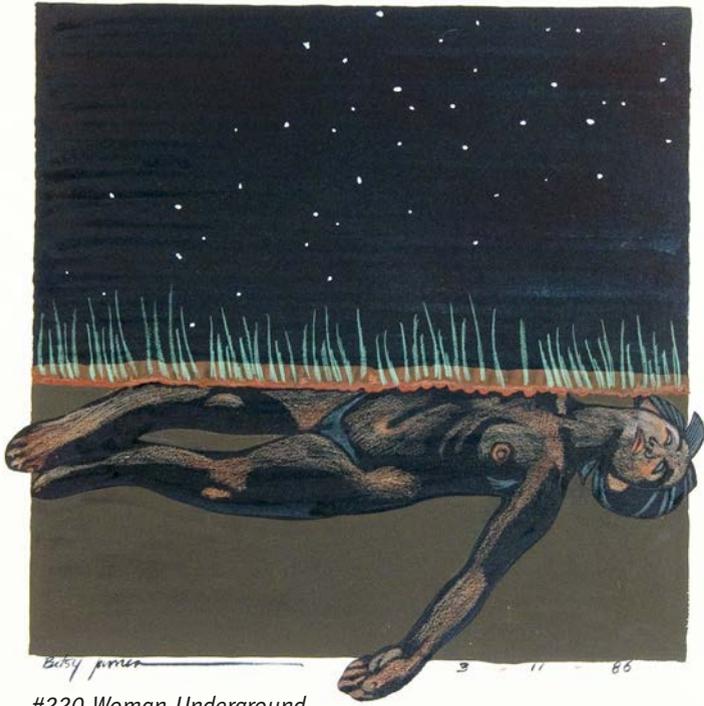
#246 Animal Woman



#266 Who Are You?



#237: The Artist in Her Studio



#220 Woman Underground



#101: The Forehead Mark

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