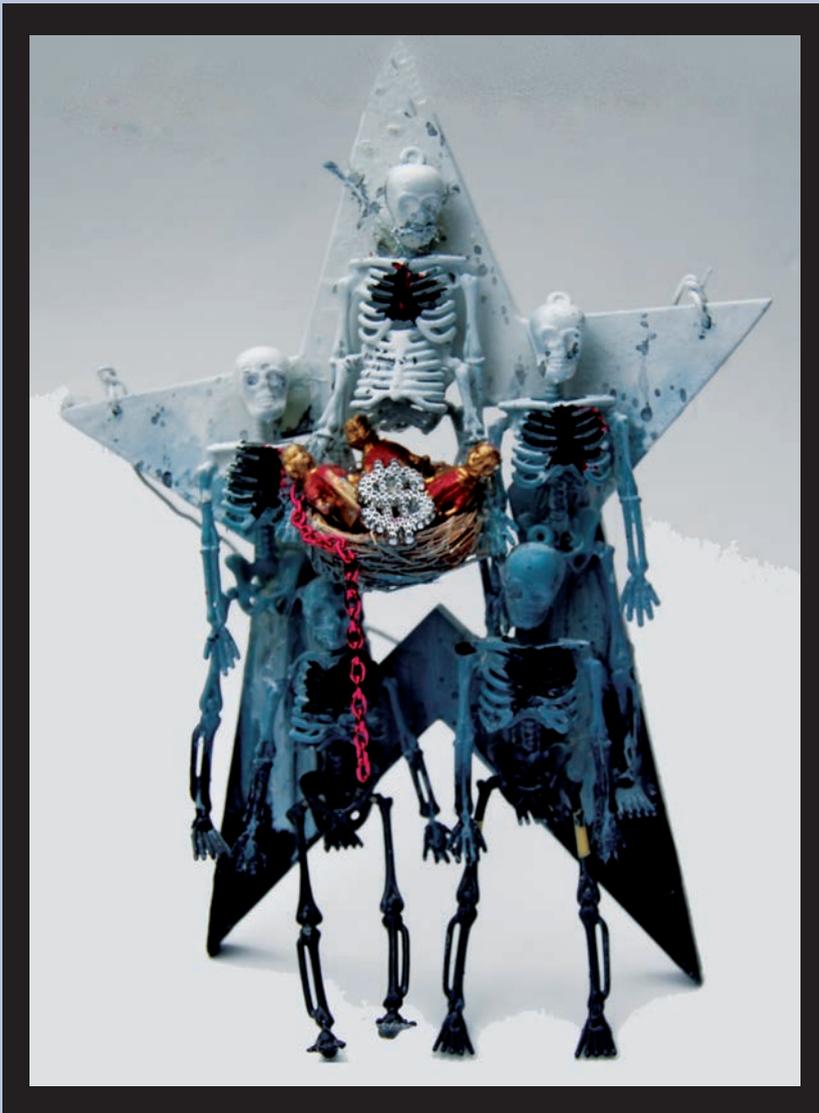


The Cascadia Subduction Zone

A LITERARY
QUARTERLY
2017 ☉ Vol. 7, No. 3

Born a Girl ☉ Karen McElroy



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"If your takeaway...is that *The Cascadia Subduction Zone* sounds really interesting, you're not wrong—it's a wonderful journal filled with thoughtful and insightful criticism."

☉ Niall Harrison, *The Guardian*, May 12, 2016

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Until the Next Time

by L. Timmel Duchamp

On the morning of September 5—a Tuesday—I knew the moment I opened my eyes that something was strange. The light wasn't right, and the smell was ugly. A few weeks before, when Seattle experienced 92% of the solar eclipse, the light had been weird—unearthly, one might say—but this was something else. I raised the shade on my bedroom window and stared out. The world had turned a sickly yellow. I went from window to window, sampling views, as though the right view would provide a clue for explaining the wrongness. Peering up through the skylights in the library, I saw a small orange ball sunk into the yellow murk and knew that it must be the sun. I'd noticed, of course, that the car was in the driveway, telling me that Tom hadn't left on his planned backpacking trip after all (though he was nowhere to be found in the house).

Whenever an overwhelming impersonal situation strikes, one looks to the larger social world and its institutions for both information and connection. This is how humans are wired, and is undoubtedly the reason our species has survived for as long as it has. So, living in the twenty-first century US, I surfed the internet for answers. I found catastrophe underway on the Indian subcontinent, with one-third of Bangladesh reported to be underwater and hundreds of people dead in India, Montana an inferno of wildfires and something new called "flash drought" that had destroyed this year's wheat crop, and, of course, reportage on the aftermath of Harvey and the looming threat of Irma. Whatever had struck Seattle, though, was apparently of insufficient interest to the outside world to show up in cursory scans of social media and the national newsfeeds, so I quickly abandoned these in favor of local internet sources.

And yes, there it was on the front page of the *Seattle Times*. So many large fires were burning in the region that the state was covered "corner to corner" in

smoke; and ash had fallen on Seattle that morning. I later discovered—when I dared venture outdoors—that the leaves and fruit of the greens and vegetables growing in my garden were gritty to the touch, having been dusted with barely perceptible particles of ash. The newspaper reported that people had been calling 911 to report the smoke, and passed on a request from the Fire Department that people call to report only actual fires in their own neighborhoods. I was reminded, suddenly, of the filthy smell and Cascades-obscuring haze that had descended on us at the beginning of August—which I'd already forgotten. Perhaps the creepiest moment of the morning came when I read that the fire burning in the Columbia River Gorge had actually jumped the Columbia River.

Later, I heard from friends and acquaintances around the region reporting even more intense scenes of world-distress. While I experienced it, I thought of the scene in Seattle as apocalyptic, especially since it required trying to keep that murk out of the house (which, after a few days, became, of course, impossible) and staying inside as much as possible. During the daylight hours, it filled my vision, keeping me in a constant state of unease; during the night, I felt suffocated by it because I could not open the windows to cool the house down, and so slept little. When after several days the light became white again, even though the sky remained overcast for a little while longer, that return to health dawned on me over and over like a miracle I could not quite take in.

But really, apocalyptic? At the same time, reports began pouring in of the terrible battering islands in the Caribbean were taking, of the terrible toll of the earthquake in Mexico, of the lost homes in Texas, and so on. "The apocalypse" is a common trope in our world. But that article, "the": really? Apocalypses have always been part of human history (and pre-history). But we don't usually use the

Whenever an overwhelming impersonal situation strikes, one looks to the larger social world and its institutions for both information and connection. This is how humans are wired, and is undoubtedly the reason our species has survived for as long as it has.

"The apocalypse" is a common trope in our world. But that article, "the": really?

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Until the Next Time
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In just the US this year there have been so many disasters that FEMA ran out of money in August.

indefinite article with that noun, probably because we sense it diminishes the extremity and harshness we're trying to designate. And in the case of the smoke and ash covering Seattle, however distressing physically and psychologically it may have been (and I have no doubt that people with respiratory illnesses suffered considerably), its significance isn't inherent in the experience itself, but in what it tells us about what is happening to our world. The consequences of global warming, which scientists have been telling us about for decades, are here: which is to say, we're living in that future we've helped create, a future many of us have imagined at comfortable arm's length. That sickly yellow light, that orange sun and that bloody moon, that nauseating stench: I recognized these, deep within my body, as signs of the world gone wrong. And in fact, all around the world, such signs—many of them life-wrecking and brutal—are forcing themselves on us.

I'm not advocating handwringing, but I think we need to find ways to articulate and engage with these scenes of world-distress. The habit in US culture is to report the ("a?") non-local apocalypse and then move on (and if one apocalypse eclipses another, to not even do that much). To tune into a cable news station for 24/7 disasterertainment; maybe make a contribution to a high profile aid organization. And then, eventually, to forget it (unless, that is, the distress is local and thus inescapable). After all, the world experiences these all the time. In just the US this year there have been so many disasters that FEMA ran out of money in August.

It bothers me, this trajectory. Don't we all feel that the most important thing after a shock is restoring a sense of normality, within which we can find a way of packaging the event or circumstances that produced the shock? It's probably no accident that one of the common responses to trauma is to try, continually (in my own case, while lying in bed at night, insomniac), to put fragments of memory into an order that attempts to make sense of what has not yet—perhaps cannot be—processed. Amitav Ghosh, in

The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable, suggests that climate change, and its many extreme manifestations, is difficult to write about in fiction for various reasons, one of which is fiction's reliance on common-sense notions of the probable, given that "the weather events of this time have a very high degree of improbability." (26) In the last five years, floods occurring in the US have frequently been characterized as "five-hundred-year" or even "thousand-year" floods—i.e., floods with the statistical probability of occurring once every five hundred or thousand years.

In a superb essay reviewing *The Great Derangement*, Vandana Singh takes note of how the sheer complexity of climate change has generated "cracks in the imposing edifice of the Clockwork Universe" and suggests that one of the conceptual difficulties facing all of us (including scientists) is "paradigm blindness." She agrees with Ghosh that confronting climate change is a problem of the imagination. And I agree wholeheartedly with Vandana.

But the part of me looking at my responses through that half-week of wrongness and what happened when the wrongness seeped away tells me that there's a form of denial built into us, perhaps because humans carry a consciousness of the inevitability of death that is—must be—perpetually set aside. We seem to continually need to revert to—or when that isn't possible, reinvent—a sense of the normal that permits us to maintain social patterns, reassuring us that we haven't been overrun by catastrophe (even if individuals or even communities among us will never recover what has been lost). Which is why, perhaps, we feel that "true" apocalypse (*the* apocalypse?) will always lurk at the horizon as a distant but easily deferrable fear.

After Trump's election, many people in the US vowed to refuse "normality" to the shenanigans enacted by his administration and pet Congress. Isn't that, actually, what is needed for climate change? We're in a permanent state of emergency, and although many of us know it, we're living as if we're not.

We seem to continually need to revert to...a sense of the normal that permits us to maintain social patterns, reassuring us that we haven't been overrun by catastrophe....



Several thousand years ago, humans invented government because they understood that certain collective problems like floods, droughts, and famines could only be survived through concerted collective effort. In the current-day US, a significant percentage of the population are so fascinated by the power and responsibility of the individual as to believe that the only rational function of governments is the protection of private property and corporations, and in a “rational society,” when it comes to food, shelter, education, and health care, it must be every child and adult for themselves. It’s the “clockwork universe” Vandana talks about—with a vengeance. I may not be thrilled with most pre-Newtonian systems of thought, but in certain very practical aspects of living some of them had more of a clue than the majority of US politicians.

CODA: September 15, 2017

So I woke this morning, ten days after that morning that hit my senses like an apocalypse, and I smelled smoke drifting into the house through three open windows. Getting up, moving around, I began to feel uncomfortable in my body: a tightness in my chest, a rawness in my throat, soreness and dryness in my eyes, congestion in my sinuses, and headache. Coughing wracked me. I peered anxiously out the windows but saw no sickly yellow, only a full-sun haze. This time I had to search further for information, to the state’s Department of Ecology map displaying air monitors scattered around the state. Here I discovered that for Seattle and other nearby places, the air quality was rated as “unhealthy for sensitive” groups. A few other monitors a little further south registered as unhealthy for everyone. A look at the Department of Natural Resources’s wildfire map told me that the Jolly Mountain fire was *still* burning, and that another, southwest of that one, was also burning. “Unhealthy for sensitive groups”: that gave me pause. Does this mean that I belong to a “sensitive” group”? (Due, perhaps, to my age?) Or does it mean that the ratings’ notion of “unhealthy” signifies something too

narrowly specific to apply to, say, prolonged exposure? My ignorance is showing here, and I suspect this may be one of the most important revelations of these experiences.

For as long as humans have existed, the smell of smoke has signaled danger. Seattle, unlike some west-coast cities, has never been in imminent danger from wildfires. But then I’d never encountered a global pall of smoke in the city before, either—and now have experienced it three times in the last month and a half. Rain is coming, and even the memory of smoke will grow faint to nonexistent.

Until the next time.

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Several thousand years ago, humans invented government because they understood that certain collective problems like floods, droughts, and famines could only be survived through concerted collective effort.

L. Timmel Duchamp is the author of the Marq’ssan Cycle, *Love’s Body*, *Dancing in Time*, and *Never at Home*. Her latest novel, *The Waterdancer’s World*, was published in 2016.





Mildred Clingerman: Imperfect Subversive in a Peter Pan Collar “Mr. Sakrison’s Halt”

by Nancy Kress

Social movements don't spring full-blown into such ideal states as equality, freedom, justice, liberation.

What can you say about a subversive who doesn't look like one?

That all change has to start somewhere.

In 1956, Mildred Clingerman published a story in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* called “Mr. Sakrison’s Halt.” I didn’t read it when it came out, since I was too young to read anything but my beloved book *What Does the Cow Say?* (answer: “moo moo”). The story was reprinted in 1957’s *The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction, Sixth Series*, edited by Anthony Boucher. Somewhere in my middle-school years I acquired a copy of this volume. I still have it in all its cracked-spine, yellow-paged, mysteriously stained glory. And I still remember vividly the first time I read “Mr. Sakrison’s Halt.”

Social movements don’t spring full-blown into such ideal states as equality, freedom, justice, liberation. They start small: an essay here, a speech there, a small gathering of friends, a preacher or politician or embryonic revolutionary who can see not only something very wrong with the world but also that it is possible to envision something better. From the vision grows action. But the vision must come first, and not only among those most directly affected. The rest of us need to understand as well. Often the vision is imperfect, itself flawed by some of the conditions it will eventually try to remedy. It isn’t an ideal. It *is* a beginning.

Sometimes fiction is part of that beginning.

In 1956, the South was deeply segregated. Women were relegated to home and hearth, or at least were supposed to be. Women who did not marry were pitied, especially if they were no longer young. Eccentric women who were no longer young were objects of snide jokes.

“Mr. Sakrison’s Halt” concerns such a woman, Miss Mattie Compton. The story is told from the viewpoint of an unnamed young girl who spends ev-

ery summer with her grandparents in Chapel Grove, a small town somewhere in the Jim Crow South. She and Miss Mattie are friends. The narrator is the only one who believes in Miss Mattie’s love story, which occurred decades earlier when a “Yankee traveling man” came to Chapel Grove. Mr. Sakrison and Miss Mattie fell in love. The morning of the wedding, they boarded the train for the city, the “Katy local.” The train made many, many stops.

Miss Mattie relates that at one such halt, of which she sees only the letters BRO, Mr. Sakrison disembarks for a smoke. This halt seems strange to Miss Mattie: “the waiting room didn’t say WHITE, you know. It said: WAITING ROOM: ONE AND ALL.” Children of all races played together in a park visible from the train. Then an African-American man and Mr. Sakrison greet each other as old friends, embrace, and talk together as equals. Miss Mattie feels “angry” at this overturning of her social order. The moment she becomes angry, the train speeds off and takes her away.

For the next forty or fifty years, Miss Mattie rides the Katy twice a week, looking for Mr. Sakrison’s Halt, wanting to find not only him but that place of peace and equality that she so unthinkingly rejected. The young narrator joins her whenever she can. Miss Mattie, now the town eccentric, wants desperately to make amends, to apologize, to embrace what she did not understand then. And to be forgiven.

The story is brief. The two look for Mr. Sakrison’s halt, and one day, they find it. Miss Mattie leaps off the train and, once again, it speeds away.

But the final paragraphs belong to the young narrator. It’s 1956 now, not 1906 when Miss Mattie met Mr. Sakrison:

Most nights I saw the fiery cross burning on Schoolhouse Hill. Grandfather went about tight-lipped and angry, cursing



“flap-mouthed fools.” I lay awake sometimes and listened to the hounds baying down in the bottom lands, and I wished for all my heart to ride the Katy every day, up and back, till I found the halt called BRO.... I read in my newspaper last week how they’ve locked the doors to the schoolhouse and barred with guns and flaring anger the way to the hill, and I realize how terribly far Chapel Hill Grove still is from Mr. Sakrison’s Halt.

What are we to make of this story, written in the mid-fifties by a white woman born in 1918 in Oklahoma, a lecturer at the University of Arizona, a conventional-looking wife and mother? Her picture shows her dressed in a blouse with a prissy Peter Pan collar, her hair pin-curled, her lipstick meticulously applied. She was an author capable of writing some very cloying, “feminine” stories for magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*—but she was also capable of penning the intense longing for a more just world that is captured in “Mr. Sakrison’s Halt.” When I first read the story, I was fourteen, and I didn’t make anything of Mildred Clingerman because authors didn’t interest me. It was the stories I cared about; their creators were shadowy figures no more real to me than the creators of other things I enjoyed in my Wonder Bread, mayonnaise, isolated small town. Nor was the national news of much interest to me then, nor social justice, nor even—to be frank—most other real people. I preferred fiction.

But Mildred Clingerman’s story interested me. It made me feel many things: fear, shame, anger, and—most of all—the wish that I, too, could get on the Katy and find Mr. Sakrison’s Halt. It was the kind of story that is a small harbinger of change to come, even if a self-absorbed and very sheltered young girl like me didn’t know it. Harbingers are, by definition, subversive.

But only within the context of their own time. Today, Mildred Clingerman might not be seen as a subversive but as a reactionary. Her story contains language

that would now be considered insensitive. But in 1956, her vision of equality was considered radical. It’s important to see it that way. Athena might have sprung full-grown from Zeus’s forehead, but the rest of us have to grow in degrees. Miss Mattie grows as a person. Her horizons expand, as did mine when, curled up on my violet chenille bedspread in my room, I first read about her. I did not, then, have the critical language to understand that the story is a “literalization of the metaphor,” a fictional construct to dramatize attitudinal growth among people like me. My high school curriculum included no African-American authors—not one—and I paid no attention to the news. But I paid attention to this story and thought about it. It stayed with me.

Others of Clingerman’s stories, which were collected in 1961 in her only book, *A Cupful of Space*, are radical in different ways. Not all of them; John Clute was right when he said in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* that some of her stories “wed a literate tone to a sentimental cuteness.” But even some of those cute stories embody ideas that were subversive when they appeared. “Letters from Laura,” for instance, first published in 1954 in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, features a young female protagonist who feels no shame or trepidation about her sexual adventures. The story is a romp and still great fun.

Clingerman never wrote a novel, never worked full time as a writer, produced only nineteen short stories. Nonetheless, she has a following. Some of her fans are working to republish *A Cupful of Space*, long available only from used book purveyors. She was a woman of her time, but—as the songwriter would not say until nearly fifty years after Clingerman was born—the times they were a-changin’. They have not changed enough, not yet. We still need subversives.

But we should also value the imperfect ones we’ve already had.

She was an author capable of...penning the intense longing for a more just world....

It was the kind of story that is a small harbinger of change to come.... Harbingers are, by definition, subversive.

Nancy Kress is the author of 34 books of science fiction and fantasy. Her work has won six Nebulas, two Hugos, a Sturgeon, and the John W. Campbell Award. Her latest novel is *Tomorrow’s Kin* (Tor, 2017).





Bodies, Seasonally Available

Bodies of Summer, by Martin Felipe Castagnet, translated by Frances Riddle, Dalkey Archive Press, 2017, 106 pp., \$14.00.

reviewed by Maria Velazquez

In this world, death is a spectacle and bodies are a resource.

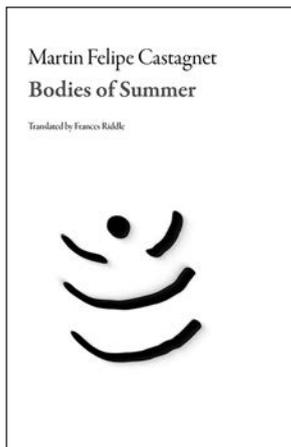
Bodies of Summer imagines a future in which death has been conquered. However, this victory has been accomplished not through immortality, but through replaceability. Your consciousness is assigned to “flotation,” uploaded online into a virtual world sans sensation. You can still talk to and interact with your friends and family, you are still you and can build memories, and, eventually, finances allowing, you can be “burned” into a different body. Notice that I didn’t say a *new* body. One body can act as host for up to three different souls, one after the other, like tenants in a single occupancy apartment. It’s unclear whether the soul born into the body counts as one of these tenants, but what is clear is that a person has to die before they can purchase and be burned into a another body. Some causes of death can be repaired, through organ replacement or other technologies. Other issues, such as age, weight, physical disability, wear and tear through drug use, number of prior burnings, and race, impact the value of a body. One can even choose to go into flotation and then be burned back into their repaired body, even though there is a class-based stigma associated with rejecting the opportunity to move into a different and, presumably, better-quality body. Basically, as the property degrades, rent declines, making the body more affordable. By the time Rama Olivaires is burned into his first body postmortem, that of an old, fat woman, the body is missing key parts, like its kidneys. This is what his family can afford, though. And, Rama notes, “It’s good to have a body again, even if it’s the body of a fat woman that no one else wanted.”

In this world, death is a spectacle and bodies are a resource. “Race car driving has abandoned all pretenses of safety precautions, drivers will sometimes use more than one body during the same championship.” Bodies are also a pun-

ishment; Rama describes the death by electrocution of a rapist and his forced reincarnation in a body with spina bifida. To Rama, the ability of the state to control life, death, and access to embodiment is an evolution of the fascist state. I suspect that this is a deliberate engagement by Castagnet with post-colonial literature on necropolitics. Necropolitics, a concept first proposed by Achille Mbembe, centers on the state’s ability to control the types and manner of death to which a citizen or group of citizens may be exposed. This is beyond the ability to enforce the death penalty. Necropolitics includes social death, like that of the *panchamas* Rama describes: people who choose to be burned into their *original* bodies after that body has recovered from illness or death, thus rejecting the state’s valuation of new and better bodies as a logical and financially lucrative progression. Panchamas are the lowest class of citizens; their name is a reference to the untouchables caste in India. Necropolitics can also include political death—for example, those citizens in flotation who are there because they can’t afford to be embodied, meaning that they exist, but cannot participate in the body politic as full citizens.

Rama has returned? been reborn into? a world he left decades before. His son Teo is a grandfather, and is himself rapidly declining. Teo has refused to take advantage of the technologies that would preserve his mind for burning. His growing senility as well as his deliberate choice to let go of the things of this world are a marked contrast to Rama, who struggles to make peace with his new body and with the knowledge that his widow Adela moved on with her life. This is a world where hyperconnectivity has made the knowledge of where things are and where they ought to go seem commonplace. After all, even “[t]he fridge is aware of its contents; any item added or





removed will register on its inventory.” For the dead, the living, and the burned, the Koseki Registry mimics the refrigerator’s inventory monitoring. Each burning, death, and entry into flotation must be recorded into the Koseki Registry, to help formalize the relationships created when a body, a person, and their family are no longer clearly linked. For example, Rama is Teo’s father, despite being burned into the body of an older woman. What are the grandchildren of that body to Rama? To Teo? The Registry helps to articulate these relationships, and Rama had hoped to use it to find Adela’s children and grandchildren from her second marriage. However, one is allowed to restrict access to one’s registry entry. Adela did not list Rama as one of those able to access her entry, meaning he can’t find out who was burned into her body and cannot access any information about the children from her second marriage.

Because of the ease of access to information, Adela’s refusal to maintain contact with Rama and her blocking of his access to information about her second marriage infuriates him, fostering “a desire so strong that it punctures [his] eardrums and bursts [his] appendix.” This aligns with one of Rama’s later observations, that the bodies of young women are particularly valuable. There is a dialectical relationship between women’s increased access to birth control and the state’s declaration that bodies are a natural resource. Adela’s choice to remarry, have children, and deny Rama direct access to the history of her bodily

production is both a political and a personal choice in a world where bodily autonomy is under attack. Rama’s rage at Adela’s choice, and his short-lived love affair with her sixteen-year-old granddaughter, highlight not only his desire to revenge himself on Adela for moving on, but also his desire to reclaim a sense of control over her generational legacies. Adela also chose to truly die, thus denying Rama the opportunity to take her to task for her perceived infidelity. Hers is a refusal to be known in a world where information access defines life more than embodiment itself.

The reader is reminded again and again that young women’s bodies are particularly valuable. Remember, they are a *productive* resource. Because of this, gender roles stiffen, growing more rigidly precise. There is a stigma associated with women’s bodies being taken over by the wrong self. Some political groups even emphasize that their leadership is “authentic women,” cisgender women’s souls occupying cisgender women’s bodies. When Wales, Rama’s grandson, decides to be burned into the body of a young woman, his family struggles initially, but ultimately treats the change as purely sexual instead of tied to gender identity, thus restoring Wales’s ongoing sexual encounters with another man to the bastion of heterosexuality. Moreover, despite being burned into female bodies and deliberately presenting as women, both Rama and Wales are still referred to using male pronouns, and Rama still thinks of himself as male. Although one’s identity is no longer tied to one’s body, it appears as though one’s presentation of gender must still be normative.

Rama is a laconic narrator. Through him, Castagnet uses spare and elegant prose to explore a world confronting the implications of a technological and spiritual revolution. The challenge Rama presents to the reader is one of engagement. How do you interpret a character who defines himself by vengeance in a world where death isn’t real? What do you do with a character who treats massive social change as ancillary to their quest to probe an old hurt? Rama is flawed, incredibly

The reader is reminded again and again that young women’s bodies are particularly valuable.

...Castagnet uses spare and elegant prose to explore a world confronting the implications of a technological and spiritual revolution.

Cont. on p. 8



Bodies

(cont. from p. 7)

self-observed, and a believable narrator because of his refusal to engage with the horrors of this new reality. Even when his great-grandchildren attempt to beat each other to death (knowing that they can be burnt into different bodies), all Rama can muster is a tired observation that Wales's female body will hopefully be able to breastfeed since that would make burning one of the boys into a child's body a little cheaper. Rama's self-absorption is the ultimate indictment of society's obsession with both longevity and technology.

Maria Velazquez received her doctorate in American Studies from University of Maryland, College Park. Her dissertation focuses on belly dance and its use as an embodied political rhetoric post-9/11. When not thinking big thoughts connecting global politics to American wellness movements, she is an avid reader, writer, and fangirl for all things sci-fi and fantasy.



Civilized: The Troubled Joy of Kij Johnson's *The River Bank*

The River Bank by Kij Johnson, Small Beer Press, September 2017, 200 pp., \$19.95.

reviewed by Lynette James

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Scenes of dawn breaking over the river, or boating, or even the sinister mystery of nightfall, beg for a warm cup and a comfortable chair for the slow-sipping enjoyment of one chapter at a time.

Like *Peter Pan* and *Babar*, these simple adventures drag with them details that are no longer invisible or unexamined....

Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* follows the adventures of woodland gentry Mr. Toad, the Water Rat, Mole, and Badger, reminiscing about a way of life lost as cultural and technological norms shifted around World War I in England. Kij Johnson's *The River Bank* is a true sequel in that it continues following the friends, but introduces the authoress Beryl Mole and her good friend Rabbit to their community.

The sequel is a slender volume, but resists rushing. It succeeds for the most part by using Johnson's (really Grahame's) most important tool: tone. *The River Bank* is steeped in that same sleepy longing for manicured green spaces on the edge of wilderness, a blueprint for over-packed day trip picnics that generations have used to form their first ideas about what it means to "have adventures" and then go home. Scenes of dawn breaking over the river, or boating, or even the sinister mystery of nightfall, beg for a warm cup and a comfortable chair for the slow-sipping enjoyment of one chapter at a time. The illustrations by Kathleen Jennings are also focused on the power of greenery and impressionistic imagery; moments before or after

some key action. Like Grahame's original text, and in departure from darker meditative pieces like *At the Mouth of the River of Bees*, *The Fox Woman*, or *The Dream-Quest of Vellitt Boe*, *The River Bank* wants to be in conversation with *Winnie the Pooh* and *Paddington*, offering simple, enduring stories of friendship and small adventures that remain staples of out-loud bedtime reading.

However, time and age have also prompted other conversations around *The Wind in the Willows*. Johnson herself captures the source of the trouble with the iconic children's story: "Later, as an adult, these things bothered me." Like *Peter Pan* and *Babar*, these simple adventures drag with them details that are no longer invisible or unexamined; words like "civilized" now come loaded in ways that Grahame likely never considered. And so comes the tricky navigation of the *mythos* of the golden English countryside. No one ever *actually* lived there; at the same time, generations of people outside of the country, the timeline, and the culture have made it into a place that can never cease to exist. It's like the "American West," "Shogun Era Japan," or the "Antebellum South": magical,



adventure-ready playsets ingrained into the collective imagination as unspoiled, mostly because neither the audience nor the writers ever had to deal with their historical realities.

There's an unease in *The River Bank* as the techniques of nostalgia and critique work against each other. Grahame's original genre and structure demand that the paradise of this society only remains one if it does *not* change. People can't ask questions that have become inherent to contemporary American genre audiences or that a sequel must try to address. For instance, *why* it is so important that Mr. Toad not face lasting or major consequences for his dramatic impulses, or *why* don't women already belong to the inner circle of Ratty, Moley, and Badger?

Further, *The Wind in the Willows* is another children's classic to which time and age have drastically changed audience assumptions and responses. For example, as men of leisure, Rat and even Badger have clear assumed and rightful control of other people. They make sure that everyone plays their part in the society of the River Bank, not damaging it with either technology like motorcycles or social power like gossip, arrests, or marriage. This leads to almost compulsory narrator asides that certain groups of people-animals are "just like that." These can't be ignored, but can't be accepted because *our* contemporary American mythos says that anyone can become whatever they want to be.

Johnson's stated purpose to "open up the world" of Grahame's novel and the genre's aims of pastoral nostalgia inevitably collide. It's not that we don't have villains painted in broad strokes anymore. But American genre story conventions have changed enough, at least on the surface, that contemporary readers can't have it baldly stated that a stoat or a fox is a problem *because of* his species and then not wonder about why a badger is morally superior for the same reason. They live in the same place (the Wild Wood as opposed to the River Bank or the Hills), and the animals they're based on are not so different (have the same general predatory and aggressive

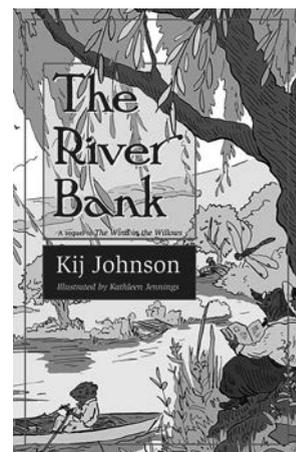
behavior). Their differences read as an uncomfortable class or racial metaphor, and the reader either has to start fighting the narrator's easy assumptions (breaking the structure of the book's world) or become complicit in those assumptions (breaking the enjoyment of the book's world).

Another example is the naming itself. Beryl Mole is the only one with a given name and the only one not referred to by her species, even among the villains (though there are more than one stoat and weasel). This is because Mole, one of the original protagonists, already uses that name. However, the overall effect is...disconcerting. If Beryl having a name is a convention of her being female, then Rabbit should also have one and be afforded either the same privilege or limitation as her sister animal. On the other hand, this naming reads as though Beryl is the only character fully formed enough to break out from the constrictions of class and social expectation to be a "real" person. This, in turn, changes the reader's approach to and understanding of characters like Rat and Badger.

There is great story potential with Johnson's new characters. Beryl as authoress joins the memorable ranks of Jo March from *Little Women* and the whole subgenre of writer-characters. Her penchant for bloodthirsty texts and using her research to save the day make her both comical and fun to read about. ("Beryl!" exclaimed the Mole, forgetting to be quiet. 'You—thug!'"") In fact, readers will want to spend more time on them instead of the men, especially as the story splits into A and B plots, with the Toad and Rabbit becoming entangled in a motorcycle theft and Beryl plotting with the others to save them.

As women, Beryl and Rabbit bring with them the "social sphere" that a novel full of men had been able to avoid, namely ideas of family and relatives. Rat now has cousins he's obliged to visit, and Toad has some "battle-axe" aunt that can be used as a threat against him. Beryl and Rabbit mention families and *should* have people they want to see besides the boy's club that is often reluctant to

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Cont. on p. 10



Troubled Joy (cont. from p. 9)

Beryl and Rabbit are the chief symbols of Johnson's changes to this world, but they still manage to fail the Bechdel Test....

Lynette James has an MFA from USM Stonecoast and presents frequently at ICFA. Her work focuses on representation, particularly in stories for young people and diverse audiences, and has appeared in *Dissections Horror E-zine*, *Extrapolation*, and *The LA Review of Books*.

include them. Unfortunately, trying to stay true to the tone and perspective of Grahame's original means that "ladies" can only act as tag-alongs to the original crew, mysteries to be solved rather than initiators of a wholly separate plot.

This frustrating distance from two really neat characters means something very different to contemporary readers. Beryl and Rabbit are the chief symbols of Johnson's changes to this world, but they still manage to fail the Bechdel Test, those now-famous questions of whether a story includes female characters and lets them interact beyond commenting on men. In fact, we almost only hear about their relationship as Beryl is apologizing to others. When the mysterious relationship between Beryl and Mole is revealed, it feels more like a cheat than a relief. Since Beryl's also known the truth from the beginning, and has shown herself capable of self-awareness and motivation, readers crave more hints on her end throughout the novel as to what this relationship has been like, but we're only allowed to see it from Mole's or Rat's perspective. Beryl is allowed her own views only when she's being an author, *not* on adventures with the original River Bankers. Nowadays, it's more common

to go with faux-historical or alternate history in order to have one's high language and one's feminism, too. Gail Carriger's *Soulless*, Meljean Brook's *The Iron Duke*, and Mary Robinette Kowal's Glamourist books come to mind, though scattershot in terms of time frame and genre. Alternately, readers may find themselves longing for Virginia Woolf, Agatha Christie, *The Secret Garden*, or *A Little Princess* for more female perspectives on the era (though in the same quandary about dated assumptions).

Ultimately, *The River Bank* succeeds in what it tries for, which is to match in tone and basic structure Kenneth Grahame's original work. That takes a lot of effort and care, and shouldn't be dismissed in any way. Presenting a beloved work a century later without cynicism is a difficult line to walk. At the same time, such strict adherence is what keeps *The River Bank* from being a care-free immersion for contemporary readers. It creates conversations, even ones it doesn't want to have. This quiet, warm novel will leave in its aftermath not just comfort, but inevitably questions of how much we agree with or are bothered by those clearly treasured bygone days.

The Repository

by Rose Lemberg

Above-clouds in the stone temporality of self,
in this very moment a light is born, rotating
beyond and between the tenets of the universe.
I am preoccupied with this light,
the way it passes
between breaths and molecular structures,
rarely revealing itself: the ravaged nature of it,
an antiquity, an archive, a rebirth.
I often wish things were simpler.
Sometimes I pretend they are, as if that place
is only a stone, dense with its own materiality,
unnoticed,
containing no caverns within.

Rose Lemberg is a queer, bigender immigrant from Ukraine, Russia, and Israel. Their work has been a finalist for the Nebula, Crawford, Rhysling, and other awards. Their debut poetry collection, *Marginalia to Stone Bird*, is available from Aqueduct Press (2016).



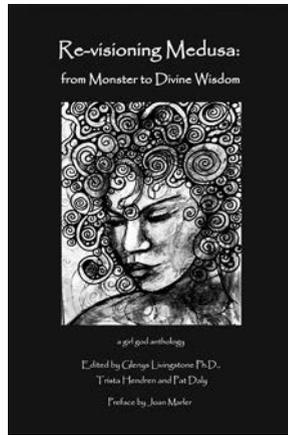
A Critical Mirror for Medusa's Re-visioning

Re-visioning Medusa: From Monster to Divine Wisdom edited by Glenys Livingstone, Trista Hendren, and Pat Daly, The Girl God, June 2017, 266 pp., \$19.99.

reviewed by Phoebe Salzman-Cohen

How do we interpret stories and re-tell them? When we take in a story and find meaning in it, how does that happen, and how do we share it? (Should we share it, and how do we know when sharing it is appropriate?) What does it mean to be an authority or expert on a particular topic? When does a particular interpretation stop being valid? How can we accept different points of view and different experiences, but also call out, ahem, “fake news”? Is there a way to call for intellectual rigor (whatever that is) without also calling for elitism? And, finally, does intellectual rigor necessarily have a place when it comes to figures like Medusa, figures whose power and interest comes from their ability to instill emotional reactions and connections in people?

I've been trying to consider these questions while reading *Re-visioning Medusa*. Though my impressions of the anthology felt rather immediate and personal, I can imagine other members of the CSZ's readership asking similar questions. This is a book that deals with the role of a female character in a myth that has been endlessly repeated, a character who seems not to have any agency in her own story. It is the interplay between the focus on Medusa and the methods of interpreting myth and femininity that make this book an interesting (and difficult) entry into the conversation that the CSZ means to facilitate. Medusa, as a character, is fascinating in ways I hadn't thought about before reading this collection. She's gloriously, deliciously scary, a monster you can have fun pretending to encounter, or even pretending to be. But she's also a survivor of sexual assault and a vessel for some truly frightening ideas about what it is to be feminine or what it is to be a woman. *Re-visioning Medusa* tries to make space



for different people to reclaim the character and to find new meaning in who she is. It is an admirable goal, and I think it is also a necessary one. Stories like this, which are this old and this well-traveled, and which carry so many ideas within them, deserve to be examined, unraveled, danced with.

And yet. I had a lot of difficulty with this collection, because I kept running up against interpretations—and methods of interpretation—that ran contrary to how I might do things, both as a lover of stories and as a student of classics. I'm not at all focused on Medusa, but I do study ancient Greek literature, which means that I've been trained to read ancient Greek-related things in a particular way. There is a certain body of scholarship that you need to be aware of, even if you disagree with it, because that is part of the history of thought and discourse that comes with the topic. There is also a particular expectation for how research is done—that different sources who disagree will be consulted, if not cited, and that you will account for your own position. Not everyone does this, of course, but it is considered to be good practice.

The essays and articles in *Re-visioning Medusa* seemed to consult a fairly similar set of sources and to come to conclusions

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Cont. on p. 12



These essays share ideas and experiences without expecting the reader to necessarily accept the author's ideology....

[I]deology-dodging is an approach that some people might prefer to take when reading the most radical and exciting speculative fiction being written today.

There seems to be a difference...between writing that is trying to express or explore the nature of a particular idea and writing that is trying to teach or pass on that particular idea.

uncomfortably similar to one another. Many of these conclusions are related to ideas about an archetypal female, or “Goddess,” which seems to me too willing to elide nuances and distinctions in order to create a narrative about how feminine power works. (Oddly, it seems to me that this is a narrative that actually reinforces a binary gender division rather than dismantling it—women’s power necessarily comes from an inherent ability to nurture and bear children, a connection with the earth, etc.) Many of the sources are from writers who either explicitly use the idea of this archetypal “Goddess” in their writing (Glenys Livingstone, one of the editors of the anthology, is cited in multiple pieces throughout) or who are sympathetic to it. Part of the reason for my discomfort is that these are not sources I’d choose to use. That in itself, though, creates an interesting problem. Is it my place to criticize these pieces for subscribing to particular ideas and systems of thought simply because I disagree with them? Is it acceptable to criticize them because they don’t seem well-researched and appear to be even willfully myopic?

The answer to some of this might lie in what each individual piece is trying to do. Some of the pieces in the collection are personal essays, and I found those to be by far the most valuable parts of the book. One of these essays is “Calling Medusa In,” by Jane Meredith, which explores Meredith’s experience with sexual abuse and the way in which Medusa, as a figure, has allowed her to grapple with that past and to help others who have been subjected to the same thing. Another is “Till We Have Bodies,” by Kaalii Cargill, which is about the ways Cargill sees Medusa in the natural world, and vice versa. A third is “Medusa, My Mother and Me,” by Barbara C. Daughter, which is about the abusive relationship between Daughter and her mother, and the way Medusa, as a symbol, offered herself as an alternative way of being. Daughter describes her first encounter with Medusa like this: “I remember clearly the derision and disdain

in [my mother’s] voice, devoid of any respect or awe, when she declared, upon seeing my second-grade school photo, ‘You look like Medusa!’ Picture, if you will, a nervous eight-year-old girl whose blonde hair has been futilely coaxed into banana curls. On her nose are perched new, slightly askew, sparkly blue cat’s-eye glasses. How could I, at this innocent age and awkward time in my life, resemble the fearsome Medusa?” The essay is asking us to understand Medusa in a particular context, as a symbol of something specific to these two people and their relationship. It is chilling.

Instead of worrying about whether or not I agreed with these essays, I was instead trying to understand the writers’ views of Medusa and how Medusa affects their particular way of thinking and moving through the world. These essays share ideas and experiences without expecting the reader to necessarily accept the author’s ideology, as well.

It does not escape me, as I’m writing this, that this ideology-dodging is an approach that some people might prefer to take when reading the most radical and exciting speculative fiction being written today. “At least it wasn’t too political,” someone might say, or, “social justice agenda aside, the plot was good.” It is an attitude I despise. I am uncomfortable with the thought that I might be subscribing to it here, too.

When the academic articles didn’t sit right with me, I almost felt better about it, because I felt as if we were playing by the same rules. The most academic of these articles, “Medusa: Ferocious and Beautiful, Petrifying and Healing: Through the Words of the Ancients,” is by Miriam Robbins Dexter, a research affiliate at UCLA, someone who clearly knows the academic conventions and expectations that I laid out a few paragraphs ago. It contains ample footnotes, block quotes, and is written in a tone that wouldn’t seem out of place in an academic journal. In other words, it knows how to speak my particular language. I feel far more comfortable criticizing this article than any other piece in the anthology because it is written in that style and because it



is written about a field I study. I can see that there is too much summary without citation, and that the citations that exist tend toward a particular ideology. Even though its historical research may be sound, its interpretations lean on an idea of an archetypal “Goddess” and on Freudian ideas about male reactions to female anatomy (she also cites Sándor Ferenczi and Erich Neumann). All of this, together, is methodology I feel comfortable criticizing. The article is positioning itself as a piece of well-researched scholarship meant to educate readers about mythological trends related to Medusa, but because I can tell that it isn’t quite what it purports itself to be, I feel that I am in a position to speak against it.

There seems to be a difference, at least in the way I’ve reacted to these pieces, between writing that is trying to express or explore the nature of a particular idea and writing that is trying to teach or pass on that particular idea. The former

is important to engage with. The latter can be important to engage with, too, if it makes its stakes clear and tries to account for its own particular point of view. If not, and if it does not do its work well, it can be frustrating, disingenuous, and even pernicious.

It isn’t as if there’s always a clear line between these two types of investments, either. Academic writing often comes from some kind of personal investment. Personal investment often involves deep thought, feeling, and inquiry. I think what I am seeking, and what I often found lacking in *Re-visioning Medusa*, was an honesty about stakes and awareness of context. But reading it meant that I had to grapple with these problems in a way I hadn’t before, and, for that, I’m glad I read it. *CSZ* readers who are also concerned with female figures in myth and with different methods of interpretation will probably find that this collection gives them much to consider.

I think what I am seeking, and what I often found lacking in Re-visioning Medusa, was an honesty about stakes, and awareness of context.

Phoebe Salzman-Cohen studies fantasy, science fiction, and ancient Greek (with a particular focus on Homer). She spends much of her spare time making strange things up and either writing about them or putting them into role-playing campaigns.

The First Family

Time’s Oldest Daughter by Susan W. Lyons, Aqueduct Press, February 2017, 248 pp., \$18.00.

reviewed by LaShawn M. Wanak

When I received *Time’s Oldest Daughter* in the mail, I was prepared to be unimpressed. As a Christian, I’ve seen my share of Biblical “retellings” from religious publishers fantasizing scenes from the Bible that could be easily made into a Hallmark Channel movie-of-the-week. I’ve also seen my share of “retellings” from secular authors eager to rewrite Biblical stories to include more sex and depravity, as if the source material did not have enough of that to begin with. Thus when my 13-year-old son asked me what I was reading—I suspect his curiosity had to do with the half-clad woman gazing fiercely from the book’s cover—I told him, “Think of it as Bible fanfic.”

At its simplest, fanfic is just a retelling of a familiar story using familiar characters to view it in a brand new way. The book version of *The Shack* can be considered fanfic in that it looks at

the nature of the Holy Trinity through entirely new portrayals of its elements: a large, beaming black woman for God, a Middle Eastern man with a large nose for Jesus, and a lithe, mysterious Asian woman for the Holy Spirit. Yeah, I wasn’t impressed with *The Shack*, either, but embedded within all the tired stereotypes there were some really good ideas that made me think.

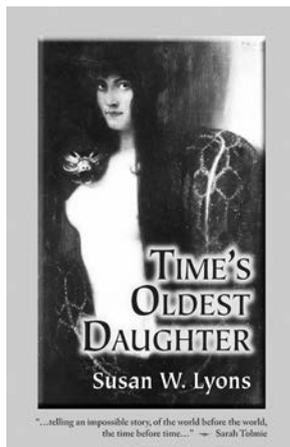
And so it was with *Time’s Oldest Daughter*.

The book opens with Sin introducing herself with these lines: “As I was being born, I was being raped. As I was being raped, I was becoming a mother.” A horrifying way to start a tale, but sadly, it makes sense that Sin comes into being through a vile act. Her rapist is her father, Lucifer, Bringer of Light, who in the act of stepping away from God sees his own shadow on the ground, imbues it

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Cont. on p. 14





Sin tells her origins very matter-of-factly; indeed, for most of the book, she's a calm and passive observer.

with a gender (“She, a shadow he”), and falls upon it to immediately subdue and impregnate it. In the same moment, Sin gives birth to Death, a hellish beast who also rapes her and afterwards devours any further children she bears.

Sin tells her origins very matter-of-factly; indeed, for most of the book, she’s a calm and passive observer. In an objective voice she narrates the tale of her father/husband Satan splitting away from God, whom he’s been a part of forever; the very act of stepping away throwing everything into chaos. Just as objectively she narrates God’s subsequent attempt to repair the damage, the ensuing battle of wills and wits (and blood), and Satan’s fall from Heaven into the realm of Hell. It will not be the last fall in the story.

To the familiar characters of the Creation story—God, Satan, the angels, Adam and Eve—Lyons adds in the Greek gods, the Muses, and the Titans. And we also have Lucifer/Satan’s followers—Belial, Beelzebub, Sin, and Death. In the background the creation of the world takes place. Lyons does a lovely thing where she binds the making of the elements with the respective angels and demons. In Lyons’s retelling, science has a strong presence in God’s creation. The demons emit sulfur and naphthalene; the angels organize the existence of nitrates and radioactive compounds. The interplay between the angels, Satan’s attempts to shape his own domain, and the growing relational rift between himself and God is so fascinating that when

Sin breaks into the narrative to remind us that she’s still in Hell, it feels intrusive.

One reason I had trouble with this book was that Sin didn’t act like sin. Satan himself is as we expect. Full of arrogance and bluster, he corrupts innocence and wreaks havoc just for the fun of it. For some reason, he also likes to spout bad poetry. Sin, in contrast, doesn’t live up to her name. She does not exhibit any moral depravity, and when she does, it is mostly from ignorance rather than from willful disobedience. When she is not recounting the events of Satan’s fall, she spends her time in a one-sided dialogue with him, asking him why he doesn’t love her and Death like a true father/husband. Satan, naturally, is only vaguely aware of Sin and Death, interacting with them only to use them for his nefarious ends. She is a victim to both her father and her son, but she doesn’t despise them; in fact, she cares for Death even as he does despicable things to her, declaring what she feels *motherlove*.

Sin has no agency. Sin only exists. Contrast that passive state with Eve, who arrives in the book’s second half.

Lyons takes the interesting approach of not following the storyline of Genesis 2, in which Eve is created from Adam’s rib. Rather, the two mortals come into being together, first described as “the children.” Lyons doesn’t portray Adam and Eve as the happy, sunshiny, everything-is-beautiful caricatures most often seen in children’s picture Bibles. Lyons’s portrayal gives them flesh and blood and emotions. Adam and Eve have conversations. They play. They talk with God. They think. And they get annoyed with each other. Eve’s portrayal is especially interesting, and I would call it feminist. Though she loves God, she finds him too loud and scary at times. Eve has her own thoughts and her own mind, and takes pains to remind Adam of that. She questions Adam’s point of view, challenges him when he wants her to agree with him, grows irritated by his constant companionship. This irks Adam enough to make him show his dominance even before Eve bites into the forbidden fruit.

In Lyons’s retelling, science has a strong presence in God’s creation.



Eve is antithetical to Sin. There's a moment when she tells Adam, "I may be your other self, but I am not a shadow... Shadows stay right at the feet of their owners and reflect their every action." An interesting phrase, considering that Sin is indeed a shadow of Satan, yet she does not reflect his actions. Sin eventually comes to the realization that she cannot stay in Hell, and although her child is bestial and horrid, she cares enough to seek a better place for the both of them. And now I'm reevaluating my opinion of Sin, because while she doesn't do much, what she is capable of doing is questioning. "What is Sin?" she asks of God, who ponders her question, then says that she is an error. She pushes God. "Was I a cause or an effect? An agent or an object? Satan stepping back, stepping away...is that my fault?"

This is where the book shines most. It is reminiscent of *The Shack* in that there are some fascinating theological discussions. Why have the Tree of Good and Evil at all? Why didn't Eve or Adam think before eating its fruit? If God was so omnipotent, why didn't he stop Adam and Eve (or give them more than one warning)? Why have sin at all? Lyons's efforts at answering these hard questions work only occasionally, for at times the discourse devolves into wordplay, which seems at odds with the serious themes of the discussions. But Lyons's view of the Fall as not so much disobedience but a painful way to grow and change is to me the most interesting view of the Fall I've ever heard (and I immediately have to silence all the evangelical voices rising in me to call foul). Lyons manages to handle the Fall and its moral consequences by employing a beautiful touch that also arouses hope.

One of my most favorite parts of the book is when God is debriefing the angels about the Fall and disobedience. God explains that, unlike themselves, Eve and Adam live in Time and will learn and grow within Time's boundaries. Raphael, heartbroken, wonders why this wasn't part of the humans' previous education.

"What makes you think that this *isn't*?" God replies.

I'm trying to avoid spoilers (albeit, we all know what happens after the Fall, right?), but we do learn of Sin's true purpose: while she was born of Satan, she was also born of Time, so it makes her special. I am not surprised by what happens to Sin at the novel's end. Perhaps a little annoyed. She could have been a stronger character, but, at the same time, I don't think she would have had the right effect had she exerted more will in the book's first half. Sin is at her strongest when she asks questions and causes those around her to stop and think. And, towards the end of the book, she delivers some of the best lines I've ever come across on the nature of good and evil.

So, is *Time's Oldest Daughter* truly fanfic? Only if you consider *The Shack* as fanfic. Or *Paradise Lost*. Or *Pilgrim's Progress*. Or the Narnia Chronicles. Or any Biblical literature that helps us look at its source material from a new viewpoint. At the very least, I think this book will facilitate some good discussions between those who profess Christianity and those who don't.

LaShawn M. Wanak's works can be found in *Strange Horizons*, *Ideomancer*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. She is a 2011 graduate of Visible Paradise and lives in Wisconsin with her husband and son. Writing stories keeps her sane. Well, that and pie.

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The Not-So-Kind South

Mormama by Kit Reed, Tor, May 2017, 288 pp., \$25.99.

reviewed by Arley Sorg

Mormama is ostensibly both a ghost story and an “evil house” story. The experience of the read, however, is less along the lines of horror and more along the lines of an intergenerational drama—*As I Lay Dying* meets *Flesh and Blood*, in a sense.

After being dumped and left destitute by her wealthy husband, Lane Hale and her thirteen-year-old son Theo temporarily move into an old, haunted, family house. The house is watched over by Hale’s aunts, a trio of ambiguously aged women. The aunts are children of a selfish and manipulative socialite named Manette. Driven by their memories of the past, the aunts squabble with each other and constantly try to coerce Hale into staying. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Hale or her aunts, Dell Duval moves into the house’s basement. An amnesiac and potentially sketchy transient, Duval (as he’s named himself) sneaks through the house searching for clues to his past, while Hale attempts to escape the clutches of her prickly relatives. The title character, a nebulously present entity named Mormama, mostly talks to Theo and tries to get him to leave the house. Formerly Manette’s mother, she has become a type of haunting presence whose nature is specifically undefined. Mormama warns Theo (and the reader, through soliloquy) that the house is a malignant power seeking to trap or destroy anyone who stays in it too long.

Although the premise draws from the tradition of the evil house trope, the focus of the story is primarily Manette, described through the aunts’ retellings, various family diaries discovered by the characters, and Mormama herself. Through this focus on Manette the narrative delivers glittering flecks of history and of high society in the South in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In this regard, *Mormama* is immersive and detailed, and readers will walk away feeling

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as if they have spent time in the heads of folks who lived in that era. The scope of the immersion is narrowed to a few individuals, rendering Manette’s world in details that are specific and biased. The juxtaposition of survivors of that era with their younger relatives, especially considering the decline of their previously affluent neighborhood—mirrored in the state of the house and the failings of their bodies—can perhaps be seen as a metaphor; if nothing else, it’s a treatise on the transition and decline of certain ways of life, especially on the notion of keeping up appearances beyond reason.

The strongest theme is one of loneliness. Each set of experiences recounted has loneliness in common. Even the three aunts, spending years together in a house that sometimes serves as a museum, are separated by suspicions and enmity. Characters suffer in solitude, and the poignant portrayal of their rising desperation is occasionally beautiful, drawn in isolated, intense, burning moments. These emotional beats lend realism to both characters and story. In particular, Theo has a powerful storyline: a child with an absentee father and a struggling mother, dropped into a dangerous neighborhood with no one his age to befriend. Introduced as a spunky, foul-mouthed kid, Theo quickly becomes sympathetic as his need for comradery comes to the fore.

While Manette remains a selfish and evil icon of the family’s past, she also serves as metaphor for the destructive



force of constrictive social structures on women. That is to say, she dominates within the options given to her. It could be said that, in her era, she is a ruthless business magnate of the social and personal worlds. She ropes in a wealthy husband and exploits him, and establishes herself as a power of high society. She excels in these things, just as a cold-hearted business manager might excel at crushing competitors and taking advantage of the naïve or vulnerable. The repercussions of her ambitions linger long after she's gone, shaping not only the world Hale falls into but also the motives of the aunts and Mormama.

Stylistically the story is discombobulating. A jumble of names and images are tossed together, timelines switch back and forth, and characters jump from idea to idea, often falling into repetition. Though far from linear, arguably the style best matches the amnesiac Duval's mental condition. And after all, he's the first point of view character.

The entire book takes a conversational tone, even flirting with stream of consciousness storytelling. It shifts from first to third person, fusing them at times, even utilizing second person. The result is an experience of authenticity, of characters that are simply sitting you down and telling you their story; which again, arguably, matches the rambling style that one might expect from some of the tale's inhabitants.

The downside is that this technique results in moments in which potential horror (or even tension) is flattened: narrators often state their emotions to readers, by extension instructing the reader as to what should be felt. Danger and urgency are lost, while overlapping needs and contrasting perspectives take the spotlight, usually demonstrated through the mechanism of interesting social dynamics between generations at odds.

Plotwise, *Mormama* is thin, and the story relies heavily on introspection and reflection. The biggest obstacles at any given point are really prevarications. Then again, *Mormama* is not so much about plot as it is about mood, the desperation of innocence lost in loneliness.

It's not so much about what's going on "now" as it is about the people who set the stage for "now"—Manette and her immediate family members—and about the reverberations of their choices. The larger problem with the plot is that critical exchanges hinge on characters withholding information from each other—these exchanges aren't necessarily unrealistic, but they push the boundaries of the realistic and can temporarily damage the lush haze of immersion into otherwise authentic characters.

Nonetheless, *Mormama* offers an intriguing exploration of people, relationships, and perspectives, as well as a thoughtful exposé of greed and its effects through generations.

Mormama offers an intriguing exploration of people, relationships, and perspectives....

Arley Sorg lives in Oakland, California and writes in local coffee shops. A 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate, he's an assistant editor at *Locus Magazine*. He's soldering together a novel, has thrown a few short stories into orbit, and hopes to launch more.

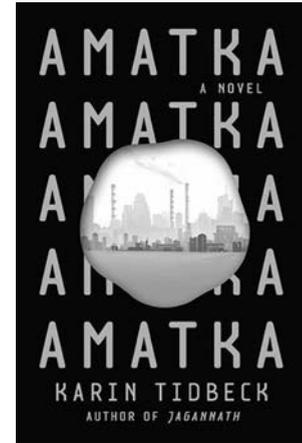




Correctly Filing the World's End

Amatka by Karin Tidbeck, Vintage, June 2017, 224 pp., \$11.00.

reviewed by Tansy Rayner Roberts



The apocalypse of this story is not an action movie.... It's a gentle descent into snowy silence.

Amatka, by Karin Tidbeck, is a chilling, powerfully quiet science fiction novel about humanity's ability to maintain order in the face of disaster: to stay organized, to stay sane, and to ignore truths in order to keep going just a little longer.

The apocalypse of this story is not an action movie. There's nothing to punch, or fight, or conquer. It's a gentle descent into snowy silence. It's beautiful. It's horrifying.

Vanja's job is simple: to travel to the snowbound outpost city of Amatka and report on the residents' usage of hygiene products. Her mission, while quite vague and unsatisfying, is to learn more about the people of the city and how open they might be to trying new brands.

The first thing she learns about the people of Amatka is that they are resistant to change and seem generally content with their very simple lifestyle.

The second thing she learns is that they're all terrified.

Vanja falls slowly in love with this city and community, which offer a greater sense of purpose than her own mindless job. She forms a romantic relationship with smart, capable Nina, and joins her family.

But she has traded one form of rigorous bureaucracy for another: in Amatka, labels and words are so important that books are carefully monitored, and identity is regimented.

Words are all-important in this fascinating, sinister novel in which poetry represents resistance to a deeply controlled world order, paper is at a premium, and spoons...well. Spoons aren't always spoons.

So many novels about revolution and oppression are about how important it is to shake off the yoke of tyranny, to speak up loudly, to fight. But Vanja's quiet rebellion against authority—asking questions, reading letters, allowing parts of reality to dissolve in the name

of a very tentative curiosity—is every bit as dangerous and volatile as if she had set a city alight.

I appreciated the everyday domesticity of Vanja's life—the soft detail of meals, family rituals, and, of course, a preoccupation with hygiene products. This grounded the novel so thoroughly that the surreal horrors and science fictional concepts at the heart of the story were able to creep up on me until I found myself surrounded by disturbing, dissolving objects.

Vocabulary, language, poetry, and report-writing are all used in different ways to help define Vanja's reality, and also to conceal the horrible truths lurking just beneath that reality. I love books that do clever things with words, and *Amatka* is extremely clever, even if a lot of that cleverness is expressed in quite bleak, unsettling ways.

Unsettling. That's a good word for it.

It's winter in Australia right now. I mention this because those of you in the northern hemisphere might read this book in summer or early autumn, and you might find it a charming contrast to your everyday reality.

Me? I'm not sure I'll ever be warm again.

This novel isn't for everyone. If you have a tendency towards existential angst, if family members committing suicide is a trigger for you, and, to be honest, if you're in any way depressed, this probably isn't something you want to be read-

Words are all-important in this fascinating, sinister novel in which poetry represents resistance to a deeply controlled world order....



ing right now. At least, not while you're alone in the house on a bleak winter's evening...

Trust me on this: if you're going to read this beautiful, but fairly dispiriting novel (there is hope, there is poetry, but oh, we're sinking, and I'm not sure much is going to save us), arrange for someone to deliver hot drinks, hugs, and layers of warm blankets as you allow yourself to be slowly consumed by the layers within.

The writing is beautiful. The content is deeply disturbing. It's an amazing book. I never want to read it again. If you'll excuse me, I think I need to go cook a hot, comforting meal for my family and hope nothing starts dissolving around me...

*The writing is beautiful.
The content is deeply
disturbing. It's an
amazing book.*

Tansy Rayner Roberts is a Tasmanian SFF writer, pop culture critic and cohost of Hugo Award-winning feminist podcast Galactic Suburbia. You can find out more about her work at <http://tansyrr.com/> or follow her on Twitter at @tansyrr.

Dis Genite et Geniture Deos

by Sonya Taaffe

Get out of here with your armful of gods
clutched like grievances to your chest,
hit your marks and get your story straight
before history catches you dreaming on the job.
I have a war to attend to, curses, elephants.
You leave your women like cities behind you,
in flames.
I ran once too from a hearth turned holocaust,
the goddess pointing my road across the sea.
I raised these walls on oars and silver.
I bowed to none but the crescent moon
and my heart.
Go on, take your son with you,
far heir to an empire of forever-setting sun.
When you lie in the bed of your westward princess
and dream of your children's wars,
look again to the palisades of the eastern star:
behind sibyls and poets
like two shadows of one hand,
your mother and my goddess
are raising their cups to the dawn.

Cosmopolitan Bias

by Sonya Taaffe

Dream of smoke, dream of shtetls,
dream of the star fluttering on a scarecrow's breast,
which side of the *Arbeitskarte* would you have signed on?
Did my great-grandmother bring English with her
like the lover she lost
to the chalkmarks on his coat
when she passed beneath the light of Lazarus's lines?
Did yours?
Dream of chain-link, dream of steerage,
dream of the sea widening
between safety and your not yet silent heart,
I cannot curse you more than your own mouth.
The dead who see through time like a buried camera
know which way you lean already,
the speed of the spin as you fall.

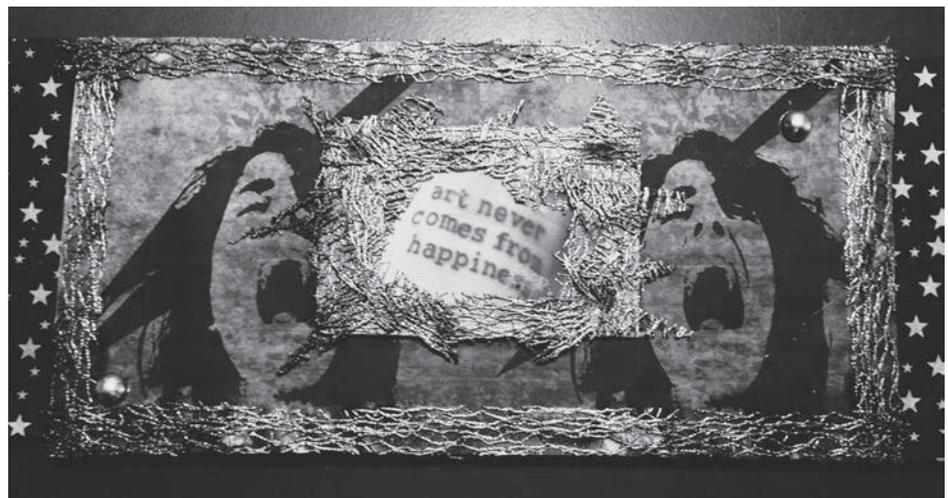
Sonya Taaffe's short fiction and award-winning poetry has appeared in multiple venues. Her recent collection is *Ghost Signs*. She is currently a senior poetry editor for *Strange Horizons*.



The Desperate Need to Create: The Art of Karen McElroy

Sometimes you are just compelled to glue, paint, rip up pieces of paper, ephemera, bits of glass, doll parts...and you know what goes where. When it's done, you may not even know what it is or why you made it, but you do know it means something. You put it on the wall and you look at it and you look at it, and suddenly you know. You just know what it means to you, and you understand why you created it. Sometimes you look at it for years and wonder, Why do I keep it up on the wall, and what the heck was I thinking? Then it hits you in the heart. And you remember and now you know why you made it. Often its meaning changes over time to reflect your own change, whatever the meaning? That's Art.

I have been seeing art in places no one does since I was small. You may see an old clock that should be thrown away; I see beyond that to the lighted shadow-box *It* was meant to be. Not some discarded appliance but a beautiful thing. I have always felt everything very deeply and making art is a way to express my feelings without words. When life is going great and I am happy, my creative spark has nothing to say. When life is unleashing hell on me is when I feel the desperate need to make something. I have no particular style or medium. I've never been to art school; in fact my degree is in psychology. All I can say for sure is this: I love to create interesting things just for the sake of doing it.

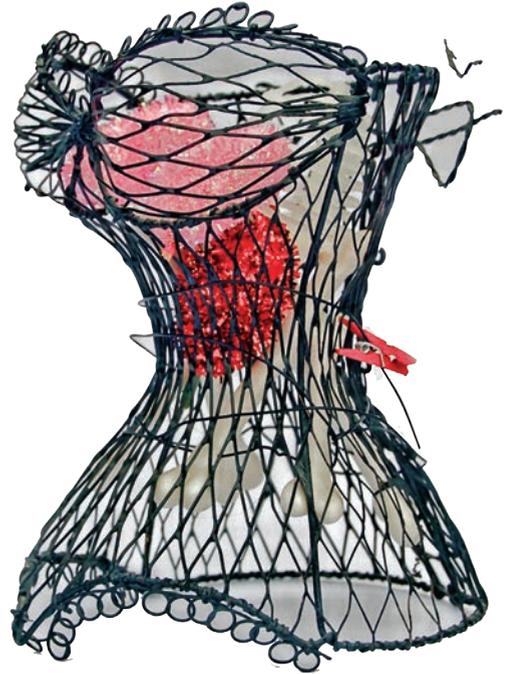


Screaming Creative





Pretty Eyes



Bones and Broken Heart in a Pretty Package



American Justice



Self in Chains



Seconds Ticking and I Wish to be a Crow





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