

THE WISCON CHRONICLES
VOL. 8

The WisCon Chronicles

VOLUME 8

Re-Generating WisCon

Edited by
Rebecca J. Holden



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The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 8
Re-Generating WisCon

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Pointing a Finger at Star Formation
NASA's Wide-field Infrared Survey Explorer (WISE) captured this image of a star-forming cloud of dust and gas located in the constellation of Monoceros. The nebula, commonly referred to as Sh2-284, is relatively isolated at the very end of an outer spiral arm of our Milky Way galaxy.

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*For my grandmothers, Ludwina and Dorothy,
my mother, Nancy,
and my children, Clara and Soren*

*We may not be born remembering,
but we can ask.*

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Re-Generating WisCon: What WisCon Has Come (and Not Yet Come) To Be

Rebecca J. Holden

I was at first reluctant to take on the project of *WisCon Chronicles 8*. When Timmi Duchamp asked me to take over the editorship of the book, it was already September; the con had been over for months, I didn't have a theme in mind, and collecting pieces and contributors so long after the fact was a daunting task. (I had edited an anthology before and knew how hard it could be to chase down good essays.) However, during my conversations with Timmi (and later with other contributors), I became quite excited about exploring what WisCon has come, and has not yet come, to be.

I attended my first WisCon, WisCon 19, while I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I had recently started work on my dissertation, which focused on feminist sf, and one of my friends encouraged me to join a science fiction book club at a local Borders. There, I met Jeanne Gomoll and Scott Curtis, as well as other WisConites, including one of the contributors to this volume, Janice Mychenberg. Jeanne and Scott talked me into signing up for WisCon and taking part in the programming. I had no idea what I was getting into—the only other con I had ever attended was a Star Trek con I went to as part of my research for a paper I wrote on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* fans. Well, I show up at the Concourse and discover I'm on four panels. I am quite shocked to be sitting next to Suzy McKee Charnas—one of the authors I was writing about in my

dissertation — at the front of the room at my very first panel. The whole experience was both frightening and exhilarating.

The next year, I'm on the concom for WisCon 20 coordinating the new academic track of programming. In this position, I came to know my true peers — sf fans like me who were in academia but didn't really fit the traditional academic mold and most often did not follow the regular academic career patterns. Some of those young academics — all in our twenties at the time — eventually left academia for careers as fiction writers, moved into student service work, or, like me, remained on the outskirts of academia. For me, WisCon was an arena where no one questioned my interest in or the significance of feminist sf — and people from all walks of life were interested in what those of us in academics had to say about the fiction, even if the academic presentations were sometimes a little dry compared to other panels. Still, WisCon members wanted to hear what I had to say and were even interested in publishing my essays. I brought my peers from the university to the con as well as my mother — a former member of the iconic League of Women Voters. While WisCon was in some ways the brain child of 1970s' feminism and sf, as a feminist scholar between the so-called second and third "waves," I also had a place here.

Eventually, I finished my dissertation, moved away from Madison, and couldn't seem to make it back for WisCon. My time and money was spent on my kids and other obligations. However, when I received the invite for WisCon 30, I knew that I needed to come back. Certainly my life had changed since my grad school days, and I was excited to see what WisCon had become.

That year, as Heather Whipple's piece "WisCon Geographies" shows, WisCon hit the 1000 person cap — and did so for the next several years. It had morphed into a many-headed beast with lots of new faces — generating new and exciting organizations and new and sometimes difficult divides. No

longer the smallish, somewhat intimate con that had to share the Concourse Hotel with Saturday weddings every year, WisCon filled the Concourse Hotel and overflowed into local coffee shops and group outings up and down State St. No longer an insider, I had become an outsider, only minimally involved in programming—giving my academic paper—and unfamiliar with the varying groups and signature events of the con.

Still, I found the panels, discussions, and readings I went to exciting and stimulating; I was determined to make WisCon a regular part of my re-entry into the sf world and wanted to learn more about the new generation of writers and fans in the field and new topics of discussion. I came back for WisCon 32 and then again for WisCon 35; I talked about world building for role playing games and body image in the hot tub with a group much younger than me, I met graduate students who did not have to fight to get their dissertations on feminist sf approved—including *WisCon Chronicles 8* contributor Naomi Mercer who had actually read my dissertation in full—¹ I discovered young writers whose sf stories were worlds away from the sf I had previously read, I heard my first speculative poetry, and I brought another feminist generation to WisCon—my daughter. Actually, that year, I brought two different generations with me: my mother-in-law and my daughter, a sixty-two year old and a twelve year old, quietly soaking in panels and readings, loving in different ways what they found at WisCon.

So, when I thought about a theme for this volume, that's what I thought about—the generations and various feminism(s) of WisCon. Many feminist scholars have explored the relationship or lack of relationship between the so-called waves of feminism; I think of Rebecca Walker's *To Be Real: Telling the*

1 In fact, Naomi was working with my former dissertation director. Apparently, my advisor's positive experience with my dissertation topic made her excited to work with Naomi on another dissertation on feminist sf.

Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism—which became a touchstone piece for third wave feminists looking to separate themselves from their second wave mothers—and Deborah Siegal’s (one of my grad school friends) *Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Girl to Grrls Gone Wild*—which explores the continuity between second and third wave feminism, or even how Carol Pearson and Joanna Russ brought attention to first wave feminist utopias in essays from the 1970s in which they discussed 1970s’ feminist utopias.

Such a topic is not without controversy and disagreement—especially in a space like WisCon that is filled with strong opinions and loud voices. Central to any discussion about definitions of feminisms are questions about outsiders and insiders: Who is WisCon? Who is feminist? Whose opinion matters? Whose voice is heard? Who counts? Who belongs to which generation and does that matter? What does WisCon mean now? What will it mean for future generations? My aim in putting together this volume was to explore some of these questions and get those of you reading this book to think about them and add to the conversation.

The guest of honor and Tiptree winner speeches that open the book help set the stage for last year’s WisCon, but Heather Whipple’s piece and Heather Lindsley’s “Mayfly” story move the book into its overall theme. Whipple’s piece provides us with an intriguing snapshot of who WisCon is, how far we come to be here, how often we come, and how many new people show up each year—all part of the generations and creation of the WisCon community. In Lindsley’s story, we see accelerated re-generation in which the women (the Mays) of the story must rely on their descendents to carry on their projects and work. Still, these women—as the narrator tells us—are “born remembering.” They carry the experience and knowledge of the past and now, in this newest generation, the promise of an expanded future, a promise that WisConites and feminists can also hope for—and a remembering

that the project of The WisCon Chronicles series and, as Timmi Duchamp explains in her essay here, other projects of the Aqueduct Press contribute to.

I see the various generations or “waves” of feminism discussed, alluded to, and chronicled in this volume as similar to the expanding and memory-laden generations of Heather Lindsley’s Mays. Nisi Shawl’s essay explores what it might mean to be feminist in three generations of her family—all of whom have attended WisCon—as she mourns for her sister, who died unexpectedly last summer, and contemplates what feminism might mean for her twenty-something niece. In discussing the significance of the feminist context, WisCon, and the tenth anniversary of Aqueduct Press, Timmi Duchamp discusses how political changes in the early 2000s underscored the importance and rarity of spaces such as WisCon and presses such as Aqueduct where feminism and the critique of the status quo was not only accepted, but also encouraged. Perhaps the need and the rarity of such spaces is why, as Duchamp notes, WisCon has been “growing younger, less white, and more conscious of intersectionality” (77).

While the image of feminism as waves in history indicates an overlapping motion between waves that I find intriguing, Joan Haran persuades me in her essay here that such labels and the generalizations that go along with them are wrong headed. For Haran, splitting feminism into waves “does a great disservice to feminists who have ‘stayed with the trouble,’ continuing to be activists and theorists for many decades” (80). Yet at the same time, Haran seems to push for the kind of remembering that Lindsley’s Mays are born with. She notes that “appreciating the scholarship and visions of the future—in manifestoes and in fiction—produced by those who experienced social and cultural movements and moments which I can only (re)experience through their tellings and retellings is vitally important” (80). While we are not born remembering, we can learn through retellings, which as

Haran argues, “can expand what any one of us might imagine possible” (80).

In fact, the next two pieces from Elise Matthesen and Nancy Jane Moore do just that. In different ways, both essays tell the unfortunately much-repeated story of sexual harassment—a story that lives on through all the generations of feminism and feminists—and provides us with some possible new endings to that story. Matthesen clearly states that she does not have the final answer or blueprint on how to fix this problem, but knows that her essay—originally published as an open letter online—“contributes to the ongoing conversations about how we can build stuff that works better for all of us” (95). She laments all the people who may have left fandom because of sexual harassment, and again asks readers and WisCon to remember: “We can’t get back the people, the stories, the brilliant fannish conversations we all would have had. But we can remember them and what we’ve all lost. We can build something that works better than the milieu that drove them away” (95). Having a sexual harassment policy in place is certainly a first step and one that Matthesen’s open letter inspired multiple cons and at least one academic conference (the SFRA annual conference, which is partnering with WisCon in 2014) to create and adopt.

The next section of the book focuses on another kind of generation at WisCon: the generation of poetry and visual art. Poets are in many ways the invisible writers at WisCon. I remember being surprised when I heard my first poetry at WisCon about four years ago; I loved the poems but was not expecting to find a poet at the reading with fiction writers. Poets are much more visible at WisCon now, and the speculative poetry panel from last year’s WisCon—chronicled in the opening poem here by Lesley Wheeler—received rave reviews from attendees. I hope the brief foray into multiple generations of speculative poetry (and some visual art) in this volume will add to our remembering process.

The story “Marie,” from Kiini Salaam Ibura’s Tiptree-winning short story collection, *Ancient, Ancient*, leads us into the final section of this volume. To me, this story is about loss and sacrifice—some have given up much in order to fit in, to succeed, to be or not be what society has defined us as—even in the context of WisCon. For many years, as she tells us here, Janice Mynchenberg felt as if she needed to sacrifice her voice as a Christian minister in order to feel a part of WisCon. Beth Plutchak argues in her essay that many 1970s’ feminist efforts “made compromises to achieve narrow goals” and in doing so, “threw our sisters of color under the bus” (167) and that many feminist members of WisCon still—in order to maintain their own identities—judge silently, or not so silently, women who end up in abusive relationships.

Questions about insiders and outsiders continue in the final essays of the book. Naomi Mercer’s academic essay on Sheri Tepper’s *Raising the Stones* argues that Tepper’s book demonstrates how religion and culture often work together to create outsiders or “others,” but argues that Tepper goes on to imagine a utopian feminist and eco-friendly religion in which everyone is an insider. Rachel Kronick’s essay shows us that while WisCon invites transgendered outsiders in, such invitations are somewhat reminiscent of past (or maybe still present) invitations to feminists at other sf cons to either educate non-feminists about feminist sf or talk about the topics implicitly approved by the wider sf community. The popularity of WisCon’s recurring “Not Another F*cking Race Panel”—back for its fifth year at WisCon 37—underscores the problems that Kronick highlights here. In the final essay, Lisa Bolekaja—a WisCon newbie last year—celebrates how her experience at WisCon further motivated her to embrace the work of re-presenting black women in her writing who may be outsiders, but are also outside of the typical binaries reserved for black women, both fictional and real.

This volume, thus, is not designed to simply celebrate what goes on at WisCon, but to chronicle its triumphs, its challenges, its struggles, as well as the perspectives of various attendees—whether or not they consider themselves insiders or outsiders. WisCon has witnessed and partnered to some degree in the birth of the Carl Brandon Society, Broad Universe, Aqueduct Press, and the safe space for people of color—all new beginnings that were not simple, easy births. Plutchak chronicles in her essay how that safe space was initially sacrificed, then re-born with effort. She reminds us that we can't simply “gloss...over the disagreements and the struggles that really happened for the narrative [of the good that WisCon has accomplished] to function smoothly” (176).

By fits and starts, WisCon grows and re-generates. Outsiders become the new insiders and past insiders become outsiders or join the new insiders. Generations mix and define themselves both with and against each other. Transgender panels exist and may eventually, as Kronick hopes, move beyond the “boring, tired, frankly *solved* questions” of the panels of the past few years. And of all this should be chronicled and remembered—both the euphoria that Kronick notes and the pain that Mynchenberg and Plutchak remind us is a part of any re-generation.

We are not born remembering, but we can and should make the effort to ask, remember and, like Lisa Bolekaja, “embrace the work” ahead.



Rebecca J. Holden is a fan and scholar of feminist science fiction. She earned her PhD in English Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and currently teaches professional writing as an adjunct at the University of Maryland-College Park.

With Nisi Shawl, she co-edited a critical anthology on Octavia E. Butler and has written pieces on other feminist sf authors, including Joanna Russ, Pat Cadigan, and Melissa Scott, as well as reviews for *Science Fiction Studies*.

SPEECHES

Proton Dreams

WisCon 37 Guest of Honor Speech

Joan Slonczewski

Thanks so much for inviting me to WisCon as your guest. I would like to mention some special people who could not be here tonight, especially my husband Michael, and my parents John and Esther. When you Google “Slonczewski,” a photo comes up showing my parents in the Swiss Alps for their 50th wedding anniversary. My mother teaches violin in Westchester, NY, and my father is in Kyoto this week being honored for another physics prize.

I would like to thank my editors at Tor, David Hartwell and Stacy Hill, for all their support; and Shahid Mahmud at Arc Manor for keeping my Elysium books in print. I would also like to thank Jesse and Kafryn, and all the WisCon volunteers for their help. And Jo Walton, for being such a great co-GOH, especially for her contributions to *The Helix and the Hard Road*.

The WisCon double GOH is a great tradition, and I’ve heard legendary stories about GOHs past. A story I heard (which, like most stories, may be half legend) tells how Ursula Le Guin and Judith Merrill received their GOH gifts at WisCon. The story goes that Le Guin opened her gift with dramatic flair, and it was revealed to be a large bar of chocolate. On seeing it, the audience members called out, “Share, you have to share!” So then Merrill got to open her gift, knowing what it was. Before anyone could say anything, she licked it all the way across.

I think that story sums up the experience of American women raised in the twentieth century. On the one hand, women were supposed to share themselves out to all their family and community. On the other hand, we were liberated to “find ourselves”; to put ourselves first. I thought of that when my son lay in the hospital for a month after brain surgery. That month I lived there in his hospital room, while my mother canceled her violin recital to help at home. At night I used to sneak down to the staff cafeteria for supper. I would have a big piece of strawberry rhubarb pie—something for myself. Today, as Sheryl Sandberg and others remind us, women still need to remember to look out for themselves.

Many of you know my fiction, but know less about my science. My science research is about the biology of the proton; the thing that combines with an electron to make a hydrogen atom. My research subject is *Escherichia coli*, bacteria named for a nineteenth century Viennese pediatrician who discovered it in baby poop. *E. coli* bacteria use protons to store energy. Protons, like women, have multiple identities. Protons can slip out of their hydrogen homes to form ions. As hydrogen ions, protons collectively form acid, a source of power. *E. coli* bacteria use proton power to run their ATP machines and their flagellar propellers. While I’ve been with you at WisCon, I left four students back at Kenyon College in a “frontier” Ohio town. They are pursuing bacterial protons using flasks, petri dishes, and a ninety-thousand dollar microscope we got from a “stimulus” grant. The microscope reveals each single *E. coli* bacterium with its unique fluorescent color signifying its pH, its proton concentration; a measure of its power to survive and grow.

Long ago, an *E. coli* ancestor slipped into a larger cell where it evolved into mitochondria—tiny bean-shaped machines that, as Lynn Margulis taught, power our own cells today. Today I watch our proton-powered carbon bodies gradually morph into a world of silicon. Like our bodies, the

silicon world still runs on protons and electrons. Like in *The Highest Frontier*, this evolving world has 3D printers that will print out food, and some day living tissues. And, like in *Daughter of Elysium*, no matter how silicon our world becomes, there will always be women. Women will always be sharing ourselves; and each woman will always need to look out for herself.

In conclusion, I have one request. Please keep reading and writing science fiction, especially “hard” science fiction by women who wear glasses. Thank you all again for the invitation to join you at this very special convention.



Joan Slonczewski was the first woman to win a Campbell Award (*A Door into Ocean*, 1986), and the only author since Fred Pohl to win a second Campbell (*The Highest Frontier*, 2011). A microbiologist, she writes hard science fiction about women of color as scientists, and explores diverse sexualities. *The Highest Frontier* depicts a Cuban-American woman going to college in a space habitat. Frontera College is run by a male couple, while on Earth a lesbian is running for president. Slonczewski’s award-winning classic, *A Door into Ocean* creates a world covered entirely by ocean, inhabited by an all-female race of purple people who use genetic engineering and nonviolent resistance to defend their unique ecosystem. *Brain Plague* (2000) depicts intelligent alien microbes that invade our brains. The secret of these unique addictive microbes is discovered by a human-gorilla woman scientist in *The Children Star* (1998). Slonczewski’s books show a pansexual perspective, including human-ape hybrids and humans married to intelligent machines. Her early work was inspired by the works of Ursula Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Anne McCaffrey, and Tanith Lee. Slonczewski teaches biology at Kenyon College, including the notorious course “Biology in Science Fiction.”

Characters, Complicity, and Caring: My WisCon Speech

Jo Walton

I've been thinking recently about the way readers come to be in sympathy with characters in a story. This is something that isn't talked about much, and when it is, it seems to be in terms of how to manipulate the reader. Indeed, I stopped reading Orson Scott Card for a different reason than the reason everyone else stopped reading him — long ago he said in a book on how to write that you get reader sympathy by taking a sympathetic character, preferably a child, and doing something terrible to them, like for instance torturing them. Once I knew he was doing this on purpose, it was like “pay no attention to the man behind the curtain;” I couldn't enjoy reading because I felt manipulated. Also, torturing children? Really? That's the only way to make me care? I don't think so.

Yet...we do care about characters when we read books. And the writer is doing something to make us care. There's something going on there, and it doesn't have to be a cynical thing. Indeed, the main failure mode of fiction for me is if I *don't* care about the characters. If you ever see me nitpicking world-building and pointing out plot holes, they're either *really* egregious or else the real problem is that I didn't care about the characters and I was poking at other things. Go to somebody else to hear about what's wrong with the windmills in *Red Mars* or the carnivorous aliens in *The Sparrow*, my problem with both books is with characters not acting like people. If I care about the characters I'll overlook or forgive almost anything else. So what makes me care about the characters? Why

do I care so much about Therem Harth rem i'r Estraven that I was prepared to fight a duel for his honour the other day, while I find the protagonist of *The Sparrow* ludicrous? It definitely isn't how much they suffer. Nobody suffers more than that Jesuit priest in *The Sparrow*—what was his name again? (That's another bad sign, if I can't remember their names.)

What Le Guin does with Estraven is actually interestingly Platonic—she shows us a truly admirable character from inside and outside and makes us wish to emulate him, or at least be his friend. Estraven has been the top person on my list of “fictional characters I'd invite to a dinner party” for decades. (Throwing gender balance right out of the window...) But Estraven takes a long time to get to know, especially for Genly Ai, our Earth-human “normal” character in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. There's a long ramp up to caring, but I really do care. I think this is an unusual approach, and it resembles my spear-point theory—the writer can build the spear for a long time, so that when they eventually drive it home, a little bit of point goes in a long way. But you have to keep reading while that spear is getting built, you don't have any reason to care the first second, the first word. Estraven doesn't start off especially sympathetic, from Genly's point of view. But as Genly comes to know Estraven so do we, so that by the end we really care.

There's another technique people talk about, which I touched on with Genly being the “normal” character. They say you should have everyperson characters so that readers can see themselves as them. I've been rolling my eyes at that since I was a child—how limited do those people really think I am? Maybe some people like this, but I'm much more likely to be interested by a weird character, an unusual voice. Indeed, that's a much better way of getting me—strange and fascinating will always grab me, whatever it is. Offer me “The king was pregnant” and I want to know more. I am intrigued. This is a way of getting me to read on—get me to have questions

I want answered. There's another whole technique there, where the writer gets the reader to have lots of questions and ratchets them up, answering some of them but always leading on with more. This works really well the first time I read something, but there has to be something more for me to come back to a book, because on the second read I know the answers, and I still need to care. There are also writers who are much better with questions than answers, so you read on wondering and then find the answers relatively unsatisfying. Those are books I won't pick up again. Tepper's early work is like that for me. I love her questions, but not her answers.

There's another standard technique, which I call jeopardy. The writer shows the character in danger, threatened, with something at stake. The reader doesn't have any reason to care yet, but the idea is that the stakes on their own will make the reader sympathetic. The spaceship is going to fall into the sun! The barbarians are coming, duck! This can work, but it can also backfire badly. If you show me characters in a situation of high excitement in the first paragraph before I have any reason to know them or care about them, I will yawn. Barbarians, huh? So what? The danger itself isn't enough; the spearpoint without the spear doesn't go through. And actually even when I do care about the characters, constantly putting them on a knife edge when they always pull through will start to bore me if I don't really believe in the jeopardy. Actually killing off a major character isn't something most writers do lightly, and killing off the redshirt characters while the major characters survive makes things worse, not better. Of course, you can get away with this a lot more if you do kill off characters that nobody would expect to die, characters the reader likes and cares about. There's another problem with making people care with jeopardy though—if that's all you have, you have to keep upping the stakes, and it can become ludicrous. Jeopardy is a good servant but a bad master.

A really good example of jeopardy done well is Octavia Butler's *Dawn*—it begins with a human female rescued from a disastrous war on Earth alone on a spaceship with aliens. But it actually starts “Alive! Still alive. Alive...again.” That's good writing—way to grab me in five words, three of them the same one repeated!

Then there's complicity. I recently saw the original UK version of “House of Cards,” and then soon after the US version. This clarified something for me. The US version didn't mess up any of the things I thought it would...it messed up different things. The UK version doesn't waste a second, it's about as tight as something can be, and the US version sprawls all over the place. But the huge difference is that Ian Richardson's Francis Urquhart is charming; he seduces the viewer into going along with him. Kevin Spacey's Frank Underwood in the US version is a jerk. I would never have said I'd found Urquhart loveable if I hadn't seen Underwood and realized that the real difference is how my sympathies are being placed. Urquhart addresses the viewer directly in *Richard III* style, but unlike Richard III as usually played, Urquhart confides in us, he flatters us, he smiles at us, and we want him to succeed. He makes us complicit in what he is doing right up to the point at the end when we have gone along way too far with him, and then he turns on us. It's a remarkably powerful piece of art, and I recommend it.

This issue of reader complicity is interesting to me because it's not the usual way of getting sympathy, so it's a new angle at looking at it. It made me think of unlikeable characters that we like anyway—Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* in first person addressing us directly and weaving webs of words. Robert Graves's Claudius, Gene Wolfe's Severian. Most of my examples are first person, or theatrically addressing us across the footlights. In first person it's easy to reach out directly to the reader. George R.R. Martin does it in third—very close third, admittedly, but still in third. One of the great things in *A Song*

of Ice and Fire is how Martin gives us characters that are unlikeable and then puts us in their heads and makes us sympathize. Sometimes he does it by making them different from inside than the way they looked from outside. Other times he does it with new information about their motivation. But in *A Dance With Dragons* he made me sympathize again with a character I'd really come to hate. And how did he do this? By torturing him! I can't believe we're back to that! Martin did it by showing us from inside what it means to be broken and try to come back from that. But it's the same technique.

Then I thought about Heinlein. Heinlein had a very interesting writing technique that really can be considered the prose equivalent of Urquhart looking down through the banisters and raising an eyebrow at us. Heinlein often wrote as if he was letting the readers into the secret. It doesn't matter what the secret is; the important thing is the tone of voice that's sharing it. Heinlein doesn't patronize, doesn't impart the information from on high, he lets us in on it. He makes the reader feel included—let in on how things really work, and with an implicitly excluded set of others who don't know. There are a lot of things wrong with Heinlein, but I find him insanely readable, and it's this tone that does it. Whether he's writing in first or third, he opens the text up and lets the reader in. When I've talked about Heinlein on Tor.com I've called this a "confiding" tone. Heinlein confides in the reader; he doesn't inform us of the way his worlds work. He confides it to us. And then he talks about the imagined science fictional aspects of his world from the point of view of characters who take it all for granted and expects us to be clever enough to work it out—as we are. And we are flattered that we are.

And I'm back to writers manipulating readers, aren't I?

But what's wrong with it?

I mean if it's cold and calculated it sounds revolting, but really if it's to the benefit of art then what's wrong with it? Writers do want readers to care about their characters, their

stories, their worlds. Having techniques for doing that isn't any different from having techniques for anything else. It just sounds so awful.

The way I think about this when I'm writing it's as if I'm shaping a bas relief from the inside—the reader's going to be looking at it from the outside, and from a little distance away. There's clear space between the outside of the bas relief and the reader, and all I can control is how far and where the bas relief goes out. So it's useful to me to know where the reader is likely to be standing and what kinds of angles they're likely to be viewing it from.

In shaping the bas relief from the inside I'm not trying to do anything to the reader. I'm reaching out into the space between us. They're standing on their side. Reading is a participatory experience. They bring who they are. Nothing is going to work for everyone. I'm writing it inside me, and they're reading it inside them; I'm doing what I'm doing, and they're experiencing what they're experiencing; but the art is happening in that space between. That clear space is the space where the reader and I are collaborating. There's a whole lot I can't control—I can't control anything but the inside of the bas relief. I can't control the previous life of the reader and how that's going to interact with how the reader sees the story. I can't select my reader—well, I *could*, but it would be a bit limiting. When I'm writing I'm generally trying to write things that are going to work for a broad spectrum of people. But I don't try to write for everyone. When *Among Others* came out, people kept asking me if it worked for non-genre readers, and I was absolutely flummoxed. Nobody ever asked me that before, about my other books. It was a fantasy novel. I never thought of it being read as anything else, being read by people who would think the magic wasn't real within the context of the story. Why would they think it shouldn't be? They weren't in my spectrum of imagined readers. Fortunately it kind of worked for them anyway. Mostly.

We've probably all had the experience of giving a great genre book to a non-genre reader and having them completely fail to understand it because they were lacking the set of genre reading protocols. When I think of where the reader will be standing I think of a reader who has those protocols, who won't try to think that everything is a metaphor. I think of a reader who is prepared to think about what's going on, an intelligent reader who pays attention. And I imagine a reader of this time and from this culture. I don't think very much about how to shape the story for somebody from the future, or somebody from a completely different culture. I'd make very different choices if I were thinking about them — I'd have to explain different things. They'd take different things for granted. This isn't to say somebody from the future or another culture can't get anything out of my bas relief, the same as the readers not expecting fantasy got something, but not what I expected. They'll be looking at it from a different angle than I expect. It might not look at all the way I expected it to look from there. They'd have to do some work to read it from where I expect the reader to be, the same way I have to when I read a book from another culture that has no idea what looks weird to me.

But I expect a mostly US reader, even though I'm not American. This is because until recently I've only been published in the US. But I was being interviewed when *Among Others* came out in Britain, and they asked where I was from, and I started to say "The South Wales mining Valleys," and I realized that for a UK context I could just say "The Valleys" and the rest was implicit. For a US context I'd say it all, because I wouldn't expect the reader to know. That's the kind of thing I mean.

I first had this thought about bas reliefs and where the reader is standing during a flamewar on a Trollope mailing list. It had divided violently on the question of footnotes. Some of the participants loved them and others hated them. I myself tend to hate them in fiction, they interrupt the flow, and

all they ever give you are world-building spoilers. But reading what other people were saying I figured out that they wanted them because they were providing them with a kind of scaffolding to stand on that brought them nearer to where the original readers would have been. I hate it when I read “Mary got into the carriage (1)” and I stop and turn to the note and it says “A horse drawn conveyance.” But if you really didn’t know? The original reader would have known—Trollope’s implied reader. And those people wanted the footnotes to be in that position—not reading it as a text from an alien world the way I do, but getting as close to the original reader’s position as they could. I then played with this difference of where the reader is a lot when I was writing *Tooth and Claw*. I had a perfectly good idea that the real reader was going to approve of cooked meat and disapprove of cannibalism, but the narrator was of course assuming the opposite, so that was fun.

When I think about this whole thing I’m conflicted. As a reader, I certainly want to care about the characters. And as I writer I want my readers to care about them. But I don’t want to feel manipulated, and I don’t want to feel that I am manipulating people—and mostly I don’t feel that as a writer, even when I am thinking about these things. The bas relief metaphor works for me, but it’s a metaphor. I’ve been thinking about these techniques and how they work because that’s useful. I hope this is useful and interesting to you too, and I’d be happy to talk to anyone about any of this later—but especially about complicity and how Estraven is awesome.



Jo Walton is a writer and reader, or possibly the other way around.

She has published nine novels, three poetry collections, and an essay collection, with another novel due out in 2014. She won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2002, the World Fantasy Award in 2004 for *Tooth and Claw*, and the Hugo and Nebula awards in 2012 for *Among Others*. She comes from Wales but lives in Montreal where the food and books are much better. She writes science fiction and fantasy, reads a lot, talks about books, and eats great food. She plans to live to be ninety-nine and write a book every year.

Doing What We Can

James Tiptree Jr. Award acceptance speech
Kiini Ibura Salaam

Writers are amazing people. They have written books in prison, while parenting two children alone, and without use of hands and speech due to full-body paralysis. And if you're anything like me, these awesome examples of human resilience don't inspire you, they piss you off. They leave you acutely aware of how little you've been able to achieve and of how others are doing more with less. We are all, as human beings, so intimately aware of what we can't do. Litanies of failure cycle around on constant replay in our minds. When we view our lives through the lens of what we have failed to do, we stand in a very small, limited space. There's no room for creativity, spontaneity, or growth. There is only a relentless obsession with what has gone wrong.

In some odd way failure becomes a space of comfort. You *know* what you can't do, but you don't know what you *can* do. Putting your failure to the side can be scary because it means you must fly into the unknown.

I spent most of the last decade creatively paralyzed and emotionally disconnected from my writing self. Between bouts of handwringing and self-haranguing, I tried and failed to write a novel and created many more story concepts than completed stories. Sick of my incessant complaining and my narrative of failure, I decided I would put aside what I couldn't do, I would figure out what I *could* do.

It did not take long for me to realize that the ten speculative stories I had published in the past could be collected in

a book. I had already written a book, but I had allowed my obsession with failure to invalidate my work.

Asking myself what I could do required me to put aside all I had heard about successful writers. I had never been able to write before or after work. Instead of focusing on my inability to commit, I dissected my day for a time that I could write. I found myself editing my stories by hand on the subway during my morning commute. It wasn't advice I had heard before. It was the writing time I could carve out for me.

After the stories had been accepted for publication, something incredible happened. Emboldened by the fact that my stories would become a collection, I decided I would complete some new stories. After being unable to generate new work, successfully editing my short story collection generated the confidence, focus, and strategy I needed to complete three new stories. Taking the small step to do what I could, loosened the constrictions of failure I had wrapped tightly around myself. Nothing I had complained about for years had changed. I didn't have more time or fewer children, but my mental state had shifted. A freedom that had been lost to me for years had been restored.

I don't believe that we are here on Earth to beat ourselves up. Nor do I think we are here to fail to reach our goals. I believe we are here to figure out what we can do with our lives; we are here to give ourselves the gift of discovery by journeying down a unique path that we unlock by noticing and honoring those spaces of ability rather than obsessing over our failures. Creating the collection brought me two awards: the 2012 James Tiptree, Jr. Award that I am accepting here at WisCon 37 and a second draft of a novel I had left untouched for years. Doing what I could turned out to be a gargantuan gift to myself. It has revealed that I can write a novel; I just needed some strategies to do it with the life I have now.

We all have talents and desires embedded within us, and we all know how we have failed to satisfy them. But life is not

a competition; it is a puzzle. The question isn't why can't I do this thing; it's how can I do this thing? We all know what we can't do, but there is so much more magic in figuring out what we *can* do.



Kiini Ibura Salaam is a writer, painter, and traveler from New Orleans, Louisiana. Her work is rooted in eroticism, speculative events, and women's perspectives. She has been widely published and anthologized in such publications as the *Dark Matter*, *Mojo: Conjure Stories*, and *Colonize This!* anthologies, as well as *Essence*, *Utne Reader*, and *Ms.* magazines. Her short story collection *Ancient, Ancient* — winner of the 2012 James Tiptree, Jr. award — contains sensual tales of the fantastic, the dark, and the magical. She is the author of two ebooks on writing: *On the Psychology of Writing* and *On the Struggle to Self-Promote*. Her micro-essays on writing can be found at www.kiiniibura.com.