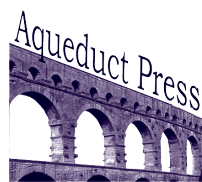


WisCon Chronicles

Volume 1

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Volume 1



Seattle



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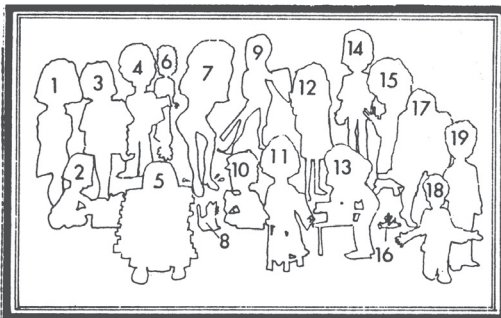
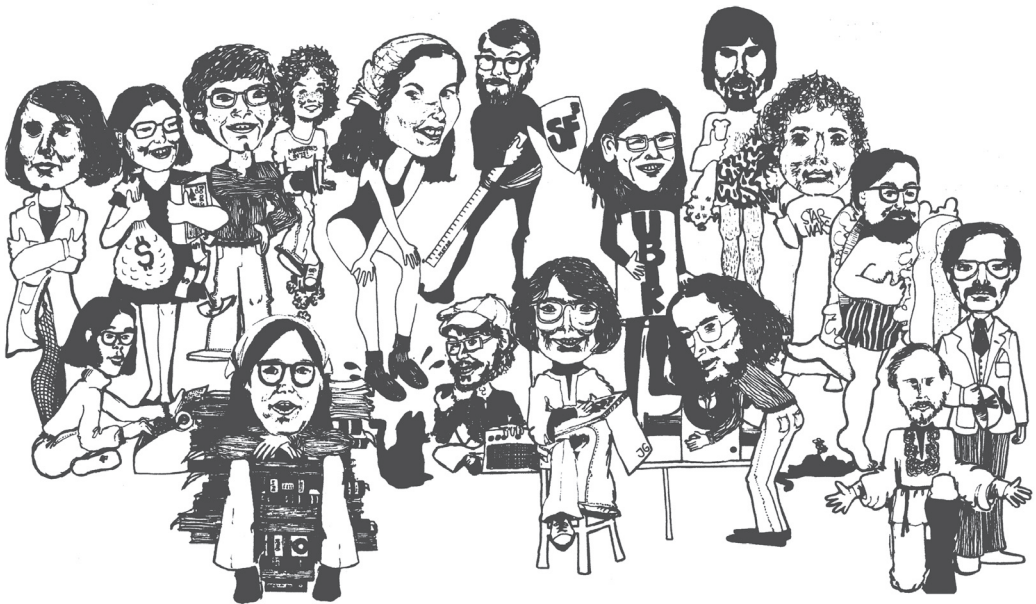
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Dedicated to all the behind-the-scenes
 ConCom members and volunteers who over
 thirty-plus years have made WisCon into the
 vibrant, ever-evolving community it is today.



The First ConCom

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
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Georgie Schnobirch

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Jeanne Gomoll

Introduction

by L. Timmel Duchamp

WisCon, for those who don't know, is a feminist literary festival organized and run by volunteers, held annually in Madison, Wisconsin. Last year at WisCon 30 one thousand people attended.

There's nothing in the world we now have that's quite like WisCon. I've often heard attendees describe it as a feminist utopia, but that's not a characterization that would work for everyone (particularly those who believe that "utopia" is necessarily a bad thing). The fact is, there is no definitive WisCon experience; WisCon has always meant different things to different people. An attempt to represent it, therefore, may seem foolish, presumptuous, and doomed to failure. But as Liz Henry pointed out during WisCon 30's "Feminist Think Tanks" panel, feminist work and activities, especially those performed in connection with ephemeral occasions, have a tendency to slide under the radar and vanish from the historical record. "Document, document, document," she urged us all—which was exactly what she was doing herself at that moment, her fingers flying over the keyboard of her laptop, making a rough transcript as a few dozen of us explored the need for and possibilities of creating a feminist think tank.

In most cultures, women's space is understood as private space, while public space is coded male. WisCon explicitly aims to create a non-separatist "women's space" that is public. A women's space that is also a public space is such a rare occurrence in our world that it *feels* science fictional. The aim of this anthology series is to help document WisCon, to celebrate the continual creation and re-creation of a women's public space in serious but pleasurable pursuit of feminist ends. The opening volume documents WisCon 30, held Memorial Day Weekend, 2006.

I regret that so much of WisCon 30 had to be omitted from this book: but a four-day convention featuring six tracks of programming for one thousand participants made omissions inevitable. I especially regret that I couldn't manage to organize a forum for discussing the post-con reactions to the cultural appropriation panel, a digest of which would have made a significant contribution to this book. Still, I hope the diversity of the materials in this volume will give readers unfamiliar with WisCon some idea of the range of interests typically addressed there even as it exposes those who attended it to parts of that they couldn't manage to experience themselves.

Out of the many papers in the academic track presented by scholars, the anthology offers four. In “Wonder Woman: Lesbian or Dyke? Paradise Island as a Woman’s Community,” Trina Robbins, an expert on women comic-book heroes who writes comics herself, explores the attractions of a women’s community for girls reading Wonder Women comics. In “Lord of the Monsters,” novelist Andrea Hairston, who is also a Professor of Theater and Afro-American Studies, vigorously takes issue with the racist subtext of *King Kong*. In “Piercy’s Gendered Cyborgs: Hope, Threats, and Blurred Boundaries,” graduate student Linda Wight, new to WisCon, considers Marge Piercy’s gender-coding of cyborgs in *He, She, and It*. And in “A Man Is Like a Nut’: Gender and Magic in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Later Earthsea Novels,” Australian scholar and novelist Sylvia Kelso examines the construction of masculinities in Le Guin’s Earthsea novels.

Panels, of course, make up the bulk of WisCon’s programming. Therefore the volume includes partial transcripts (with post-con annotations) of four panels—“Feminist Think Tanks”; “Is Reading Feminist SF a Theory-Building Activity?”; “Uncomfortable Politics in Feminist Writing”; and “Who Wants a Revolution?”—as well as Micole Sudberg and Yoon Ha Lee’s post-con descriptions of and comments on two panels and two post-con essays provoked by panels, Rosaleen Love’s “A Think Tank Thing for Feminists” and Nancy Jane Moore’s “We Aren’t Civilized Yet: Reflections from the WisCon 30 Panel on Women Warriors.”

Essays by Joan Haran and Rachel Swirsky look beyond and behind the celebratory. Rachel’s “Welcome Back to the Beginning” offers us a sober reminder from a young feminist of just how much work in our genre remains to be done. Joan’s “Researching WisCon Stories: Revisionist History or Re-visioning the Past with the Future in Mind,” which appeared in WisCon 30’s souvenir book, views WisCon as an ongoing negotiated political process that attempts to offer a “broad church feminism” that has not always been successful in eliminating implicit—often unspoken—exclusionary practices.

Much of the WisCon experience involves conversation of diverse sorts. Broad Universe sponsored and transcribed a telephone interview of Joanna Russ by Samuel R. Delany (attended by just about everyone at WisCon not scheduled for programming at the time), and we reprint it here with their kind permission. Although the volume does not include the speeches made by WisCon 30’s Guests of Honor, Jane Yolen and Kate Wilhelm, which will appear elsewhere, it does offer Nisi Shawl’s “Dry Eyes,” describing her experience announcing and presenting the first Carl Brandon Society Kindred and Parallax Awards.

In addition, we asked Eileen Gunn to interview “a coven of WisCon attendees” with one question each; and Julie Phillips, Suzy McKee Charnas, Carol Emshwiller, Mark Rich, Ellen Klages, Ted Chiang, Ursula K. Le Guin, Liz Henry, Lisa Tuttle, Diantha Day Sprouse, Tempest Bradford, Spike Parsons, and Jeanne Gomoll generously consented to make up Eileen’s coven. In his essay “A Forty-Year-Old Con-Virgin Goes to WisCon,” in dialogue with Samuel R. Delany, Stephen Gold describes his experiences as a first-

timer and man attempting to negotiate a feminist-dominated public space, followed by “Sympathy and Power: L. Timmel Duchamp Asks Samuel R. Delany a Question,” Chip’s gracious answer to an interview question I put to him about men and feminism inspired by Stephen’s essay.

Finally, we conclude the volume with a dessert concocted by Rosaleen Love. Original to this volume, “No Man’s Land” sends us off with a smile on our lips.

The generosity and cooperation of many people made this volume possible. I would especially like to thank Melanie Madden, Aqueduct’s intern, for her editorial assistance and her indefatigable work transcribing the audio recording of the “Who Wants a Revolution” panel. Jeanne Gomoll generously made the graphics she and others have designed for WisCon over the years available to us. Joan Haran encouraged scholars to send me their papers. Diantha Day Sprouse kindly helped me with post-con discussions of the cultural appropriations panel. I especially owe Laura Quilter and Liz Henry a debt of gratitude for their documentation of WisCon 30 on the Feminist SF Wiki as well as their permitting me to use their excellent panel transcript notes in this volume. I’d also like to thank the panelists and audience participants who read over, corrected, and annotated the transcript notes, viz., Vonda N. McIntyre, Janet Laffler, Susanna Sturgis, Laura Quilter, Rosaleen Love, Liz Henry, Karen Joy Fowler, Joan Haran, Laurie A. Selke, Cheryl Morgan, Margaret McBride, Sylvia Kelso, Ian K. Hagemann, Patrick Nielsen Hayden, Lenny Bailes, Susan Karen Kinast-Porter, and Avedon Carol. And finally, thanks to Eileen Gunn, for her good sense and moral support, which have been of inestimable value for the enterprise.

Julie Phillips

Q: WisCon 30 was your first WisCon, wasn't it? What did you expect? Did you get it?

A: Although I'd been hearing about WisCon, and how great it was, for a long time, I was very nervous actually going there, because I hardly knew anyone. But that changed remarkably fast. I've never before met so many people I liked in one weekend, or who were so fascinating to talk to. By the end I felt like I was going to die of talking, and I didn't care.

I was also anxious because I don't actually know all that much about science fiction, but that changed fast too. I sort of knew about panels but didn't expect to learn so much from them. (I've since gathered that the WisCon standard is pretty high.)

I did expect to buy books there, but I didn't expect to buy my new favorite pair of earrings as well. And I definitely didn't expect to see a seven-foot-tall award-winning author tied up in a hot-pink brassiere.

Julie Phillips is the author of
James Tiptree Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon
(St. Martin's Press, August 2006)

<http://www.julie-phillips.com>

Wonder Woman: Lesbian or Dyke? Paradise Island as a Woman's Community

by Trina Robbins

In his now-infamous 1954 indictment of comic books, *Seduction of the Innocent*, Dr. Frederic Wertham called the Wonder Woman comic book of the 1940s and '50s¹ “The Lesbian counterpart of Batman,” whom, along with his young sidekick, Robin, he had already accused of membership in NAMBLA. Using acrobatic leaps of logic, Wertham went on to make the following connection about Wonder Woman's sidekicks, students at the all-woman Holliday College: “Her followers are the ‘Holliday girls,’ i.e., the holiday girls, the gay party girls, the gay girls.”²

Later critics would echo Wertham's theory. In the 1970 classic, *All in Color for a Dime*, Jim Harmon describes how Wonder Woman would “exchange hugs and kisses of delight with the readily available Holliday Girls.” He adds, “It was a very sick scene.”³

In a 1996 private phone interview, Robert Kanigher, who took over writing the comic in 1948, after the death of creator William Moulton Marston, who wrote the comics under the pseudonym “Charles Moulton,” let me in on what he called the truth about Wonder Woman: the amazons from her home, Paradise Island, where no men are permitted, were all lesbians.

Not everyone agrees. Jules Feiffer, clearly wishing for something closer to *Hothead Paisan*, draws a different conclusion in his 1965 memoir, *The Great Comic Book Heroes*. “Wonder Woman,” he writes, “wasn't dykey enough. Her violence was too immaculate, never once boiling over into a little fantasmal sadism.”⁴ In her introduction to the Bonanza Books 1972 collection *Wonder Woman*, and again in her introduction to Abbeville Press's 1995 collection of Wonder Woman covers, also titled *Wonder Woman*, Gloria Steinem avoids the issue entirely, preferring to write about “sisterhood.” And in the 2000 Chronicle Books production, also titled *Wonder Woman*, writer Les Daniels, hired by D.C. comics, writes off the accusation in one short sidebar of the 206 page book: “[Wertham] saw innuendo everywhere, and...managed to work himself into a lather because he thought Wonder Woman contained ‘Lesbian overtones.’...as Robert Kanigher later pointed out, surely some inhabitants of Paradise Island must have had Sapphic tendencies. Not in the comics, however!”⁵

So, are the amazon princess Diana, her home-town amazons, and her Holliday girl sidekicks lesbians? And is this a *bad* thing? William Moulton Marston was a successful pop-psychologist and also happened to be the inventor of the lie detector. The man knew what he was doing, and if there is lesbianism in the Golden Age Wonder Woman,⁶ he put it there. What hints does he give the reader?

Well, there's the hugging, but, as previously mentioned, women *do* hug.⁷ What about lovers? Marston occasionally hints that Wonder Woman might be in a Xena and Gabrielle relationship with another woman. In *Sensation Comics* #19, 1942, Wonder Woman's amazon best friend, Paula, is called in to help when the princess runs amok because her bracelets have been removed.⁸ Stopping Wonder Woman in the act of strangling a suspected fifth columnist, Paula says, "Easy, darling—it's your Paula!"

Another story⁹ deals with Marya, a beautiful eight-foot-tall "Mexican mountain girl," who definitely has a crush on Wonder Woman. She calls Wonder Woman "brave princess" and "beautiful princess." When the two women are captured in nets, Wonder Woman, ungraciously considering only her dumb blond "boyfriend" Steve Trevor, tells her, "I'm sorry for you, Marya, but at least we've saved Steve..." Marya, with the selflessness of true love, replies, "I care not what happen to me if I help save your friend, Preencess!" Finally, Marya is encased in cement up to her chest. But when the amazon princess is about to be killed, "Driven desperate by her great love for Wonder Woman, Marya wrenches savagely at the solid cement which encases her legs." Leaping from the cement she shouts, "My preencess—I **come!**" Finally, Wonder Woman freed and the villains vanquished, Wonder Woman declares, "The credit goes to the biggest girl and the bravest—my little friend Marya!" Marya kneels at the amazon's feet, clutching her hand rapturously, saying, "Oh Preencess!"

Getting in the way of Wonder Woman's relationships with other women is always Steve Trevor, the Token Boyfriend.¹⁰ The Lois Lane to Wonder Woman's Superman, he seems to exist only to be rescued. She always puts him off when he asks her when they will marry, with statements such as, "When justice has finally triumphed over wrong!" or "When evil and injustice vanish from the earth!" In other words, it'll be a cold day in hell, buster. Her reluctance to marry Steve may have had nothing to do with her interest in other women, but rather, her reluctance to spend the rest of her life with someone so stupid that he constantly fails to make the connection between the amazon princess Diana and her alter ego, army nurse Diana Prince.

It is generally accepted that Marston created Wonder Woman for girls as an alternative to the male-oriented superhero comics of the time; however, I could find no actual statement on his part saying that. In her introduction to the collection of Wonder Woman covers, Gloria Steinem writes, "...[Marston] had invented Wonder Woman as a heroine for little girls, and also as a conscious alternative to the violence of comic books for boys."¹¹ Of course, Steinem was not there, nor did she ever interview the good doctor. The

statement I have found by Marston that comes closest to reflecting Steinem's conclusion is from an article written by Marston in *The American Scholar*.¹²

It seemed to me, from a psychological angle, that the comics worst offense was their blood-curdling masculinity...it's smart to be strong. It's big to be generous, but it's sissified, according to exclusively male rules to be tender, loving, affectionate... "Ah that's girls stuff!" snorts our comic reader, "Who wants to be a girl?" And that's the point; not even girls want to be girls as long as their feminine stereotype lacks force... strength. (35)

I have also found no statistics that show just how many girls *did* read Wonder Woman,¹³ so my only evidence is anecdotal. Obviously, as she tells us in her writings, Gloria Steinem read, and was strongly influenced by, the amazing amazon. In her introduction to the collection of Wonder Woman covers, she describes the origin of *Ms Magazine*: "Since Joanne Edgar and others of its founding editors had also been rescued by Wonder Woman in their childhoods, we decided to rescue Wonder Woman in return (by putting her on their first cover)." On the back cover of my book, *The Great Women Superheroes*, author Jane Yolen writes, "I was one of the legion of young girls who adored Wonder Woman back in the 1940s..." In her article, "Looking For Wonder Woman,"¹⁴ Lillian Robinson writes of "devouring monthly installments of Wonder Woman." She continues, "I didn't know she was an icon, of course. But she was certainly the apotheosis of the female hero I...sought..."

And of course there's my own memory. When I was a young girl, my girlfriends and I all read and loved Wonder Woman.

Much information can be gleaned from the letters pages of a comic. The original Golden Age Wonder Woman comics had no letters pages, but as late as the early 1960s, when Robert Kanigher was writing and editing the book, the letters page reveals the demographics of his readers. The April 1962 issue contained letters from two girls and one boy, the May 1963 issue had letters from five girls, and the October 1964 letters page was another all-girl affair, with letters from five girls. Judging from their letters, the writers were all young, and they wrote to Wonder Woman herself, rather than to the writer or editor (in this case, the same person), as later, older male fans would do. In her letter from the 1963 issue, Linda Parson, from White Castle, LA, wishes to actually visit Paradise Island:

When another reader begged you to take her to Paradise Island with you, you answered that Paradise Island is imaginary. Well, how about taking me on an imaginary trip there?

In asking to go to Paradise Island, Linda Parson is expressing a desire to go to a woman-only world, the world of Golden Age Wonder Woman comics. Steve Trevor is not only the Token Boyfriend in these comics, but often the Token Male in stories that

otherwise feature only women. Any other males in these stories are usually villains, like Mars, god of war and sworn enemy of the amazons.

Many Golden Age Wonder Woman stories, especially the ones that take place on the all-woman Paradise Island, do not include even Steve, because men are not allowed on Paradise Island. Some of the women in these stories are butch to an extreme. In *Wonder Woman and the Coming of the Kangas*,¹⁵ male cat-headed alien invaders turn out to be women in disguise. “We’re amazons like you,” says the beautiful redhaired leader, after she has been defeated, “We have no home. Won’t you let us join your nation?” In *Villainy, Incorporated!*¹⁶, the evil “Hypnota, magician of the Blue Flame,” is a mustached and bearded woman with breasts. Another of the villains in this story is the cross-dressing “Byrna Brilyant, the Blue Snow Man.”

Even off Paradise Island, in what Marston referred to as “Man’s World,” the amazon princess mostly interacted with women. In *A Human Bomb*,¹⁷ Suzan Patience, “the famous woman penologist,” wants Wonder Woman to help her convince the governor to make her warden of the new woman’s prison. Steve Trevor, whose imagination is on par with his I.Q., says, “Impossible! Whoever heard of a female prison warden?” Of course Wonder Woman agrees to help, and she starts by giving the prisoners new outfits. As they toss off their gray uniforms and try on the colorful dresses, the prisoners exclaim, “These clothes aren’t like prison uniforms at all!” “Cute!” and “We don’t look like convicts anymore—all the uniforms are different!”

For at least a few years after Marston’s death, Wonder Woman continued, in the spirit of her deceased creator, to interact with women. In the 1950 story, *Hollywood Goes to Paradise Island*, the amazon puts together the “first all-girl crew in cinema capital history,” including a “directress,” “The only woman director in Hollywood!”¹⁸

Even Wonder Woman’s birth, as related in the very first issue of *Wonder Woman*, is an all-woman affair, without even the aid of a turkey baster. In a feminist reversal of mythic hero birth stories, in which a virgin mother is magically impregnated by a male deity,¹⁹ the virginal amazon Queen Hippolyta, desiring a baby, is instructed by the goddess Athena to mold one from clay. Then Aphrodite bestows the gift of life upon the statue, who becomes the baby princess Diana. Thus, like Heather, Diana has two mommies.²⁰

The world of boys and men can be threatening to girls.²¹ In *The Reader’s Companion to US Women’s History*, Marie Wilson has this to say about adolescent girls:

Sexual comments, jokes, and threats become more intimidating as girls develop an understanding of sexuality and as boys, on average, become physically bigger and stronger than girls...they begin to realize that good looks are necessary for certain kinds of success, and that good looks lead to being looked at, which for young adolescent girls can seem threatening.²²

In the 1940s, sexual harassment in the workplace and in schools, although never approved of, was accepted as an unavoidable evil, as was domestic violence, which was not then illegal. At home, young girls saw their mothers being hit by their fathers, and ac-

cepting it.²³ In school, it has only recently been understood by educators that traditional teaching has focused on boys' interests and behaviors. Teachers have traditionally called on boys more often than girls. They have accepted that boys tend to act out and disrupt the classroom in various ways, meanwhile encouraging girls to be passive and quiet.²⁴

Girls have needed, at least in their fantasy lives, a safe place to be with other girls, where they could express themselves without being threatened by boys. British girls' magazines seem to have recognized this need more than American comics. In my study of four British girls' magazine annuals, from 1956, 1958, and 1963,²⁵ I found comics in which the protagonists, usually students from all-girl schools, interacted with other girls, and any male in the stories is usually a villain. In a typical story from 1958, three school girls dress up as "The Silent Three," in hooded robes and masks²⁶ to help a younger girl whose dog has been stolen by a wicked man, who hopes to use the dog to retrieve a hidden paper that will lead to treasure.

In "Staunch Allies of the Swiss Skater," from 1956, two British schoolgirls, vacationing in Switzerland, befriend a young Swiss ice skater, buying her a dress to wear for a skating contest. When the girl's cruel uncle locks her up, forbidding her to enter the contest, they free the girl and find a paper proving he is an impostor, masquerading as her dead uncle "to steal the legacy her mother left her!" One of the contest judges knew the real uncle and would have recognized him. In the end, a British girl hugs the skater and says, "Your troubles are over, Odette dear. You're free—free to skate!"

American girls' comics from that period are very different. Instead of the sisterhood themes of the British comics, the American comic stories usually revolve around the theme of the eternal triangle—two girls, one of which is the protagonist, fighting over the Token Boyfriend. Patsy Walker and Hedy Wolfe fight over Buzz Baxter, Betty and Veronica fight over Archie Andrews, and so on. Although the comic books were aimed at and read predominantly by girls, the message seems to be of the importance of boys in their lives. Perhaps the publishers, using Wertham's logic, feared that without boys in the stories, they might be interpreted as promoting lesbianism?

In the women's community of Paradise Island, girls did not *have to* have boyfriends; they could be "free—free to skate!", or free to be themselves and to interact with other girls.

Marston's message to girls lasted for at least twenty years after his death, although it was progressively watered down. By 1968, however, as comics grew more and more male-oriented, new creators started aiming Wonder Woman at the new larger male audience by disempowering her, thus making her less intimidating to men. Writer Denny O'Neill divested the amazon heroine of both her powers and her costume, putting her instead into a mod jumpsuit. Worst of all, he sent Paradise Island off to another dimension. Without her community, Wonder Woman was alone, and had to turn for help to a man, an old Chinese martial arts instructor with the unlikely name of I Ching.

This unhappy state of affairs lasted three years, during which time the books continued to lose what female readers were left. Although Wonder Woman regained Paradise

Island and her old costume in 1971, the costume slowly shrank over the years as her bust size increased. After disempowerment came hypersexualization. By 1994, when the amazon was drawn in her most sexually provocative style, her starry shorts shortened to thong size, by Brazilian artist Mike Deodato, sales of the books skyrocketed, but the new readers buying it were men. As for Paradise Island, it had become a place of conflict, where a vicious, minimally clad amazon named Artemis battled with Diana for the title of Wonder Woman. Sisterhood was a thing of the past, and the safe place for girls was long gone.

It will never be known if Wonder Woman's creator really intended any hidden lesbian agenda in his comics, or if suspicions of Sapphism were simply products of Wertham's McCarthyist mentality, but for over ten golden years, William Moulton Marston provided a haven for girls in the pages of his comics, away from Man's World.

Endnotes

- 1 Comics from these years are referred to by collectors as "Golden Age."
- 2 Using this same kind of logic, one might question the gender preferences of actor/comedienne Judy or singer Billie, not to mention the subversive hidden agenda that must be concealed in the classic film, "Holiday Inn."
- 3 Page 186. Actually, although Wonder Woman is indeed seen hugging her friends and her mother in the pages of these comics (women *do* hug!), she doesn't kiss them. She's never even depicted kissing her "boyfriend," Steve Trevor!
- 4 Page 45. Feiffer also refutes Wertham's argument that Batman comics were producing gay youth. He writes, "If homosexual fads were certain proof of that which will turn our young queer, then we should long ago have burned not just Batman books, but all Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Judy Garland movies."
- 5 Page 103. Daniels also writes, of Wonder Woman, "No overt eroticism of any type was present in these comics..." Yet he devotes eight pages in the first chapter to bondage and domination scenes in Wonder Woman. D.C. comics, for whom Daniels wrote this book, has courted a male audience to the exclusion of females since at least the late 1960s. Possibly the D.C. theory is that descriptions of kinky sex will interest the boys in reading Wonder Woman, but that God forbid they should mention lesbianism!
- 6 For purposes of this paper, I have defined Golden Age as the 1940s and early 1950s. Even though Marston died in 1948, he left some scripts behind, and as late as the early 1950s, certain Wonder Woman stories seem to bear the Mark of Marston.
- 7 With the exception of the French, Russians, and Italians, white heterosexual men, fearful of being considered gay, do *not* hug.
- 8 Removal of Wonder Woman's bracelets cause her to become "**Too Strong**. The bracelets bound my strength for good purposes—now I'm completely uncontrolled! I'm free to **destroy** like a **man!**"
- 9 This comic book is coverless and bears no dates, but is probably postwar, because a character says to the villains, "You—you are Nazis! But Germany...is licked—"
- 10 Possibly so that readers will not suspect them of lesbianism, fictional American heroines for young girls always seem to be given Token Boyfriends. Nancy Drew had Ned Nickerson, and Barbie, of course, has Ken. In the early 1990s when I was one of the writers on Marvel's *Barbie*

Comics, I did some research with two young girls who were playing with their Barbies at my local photocopy center. They told me that they each had five Barbies and one Ken, but that they did not play with their Ken doll much. I asked them what they used their Ken doll for, and the answer was that when they dressed Barbie up and played bride with her, they needed Ken so that she would have someone to marry.

11 Page 11.

12 “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” *The American Scholar*, Winter 1943-44.

13 Obviously, neither does D.C. comics, or Les Daniels would have quoted them in the 2000 Wonder Woman book when he makes the dubious statement, “It’s an open secret, however frequently acknowledged, that Wonder Woman’s readers have always been predominantly male” (page 33). Gloria Steinem refutes this in her introduction to the collection of Wonder Woman covers: “Wonder Woman did attract some boys as readers, but the integrated world of comic book trading revealed her true status: at least three Wonder Woman comic books were necessary to trade for one of Superman.” On the other hand, in recent times, as Wonder Woman’s bust size has grown and her pants have shrunk, and girls no longer read comics because there are no comics for them to read, her readership has become predominantly male. In the mid-nineties, when Brazilian artist Mike Deodato took over drawing Wonder Woman in what Daniels describes as “the most overly eroticized version of Wonder Woman to see print,” sales hit the ceiling.

14 Unfortunately, I do not know the source of this article, which was mailed to me in photocopy form some years back.

15 Wonder Woman #23, 1947.

16 Wonder Woman #28, 1948.

17 Wonder Woman #30, 1948.

18 The writer of this story, probably Robert Kanigher, was wrong. In 1949, screen star Ida Lupino made her uncredited directorial debut with the film *Not Wanted*, co-written and co-produced by her along with Anson Bond and Collier Young. Director Elmer Clifton fell ill shortly after shooting began, and Lupino took over but insisted that he retain screen credit. She went on to direct five more features, the first two (*Never Fear* and *Outrage*) of which were made in 1950. But Kanigher was unlikely to know this when in his script, Wonder Woman pep-talks her all-girl film crew: “We are the first all-girl company to produce a movie in Hollywood history! Many men think we’ll be unsuccessful! But I have faith and confidence in you! I know that all you need is a chance and you will show that you can **at least** equal anything men have ever done!”

19 Some of these more familiar myths are Leda, impregnated by Zeus as a swan; Danae, also impregnated by Zeus (he got around) as a shower of gold; and of course the Christian Virgin Mary.

20 It is also significant that, in the Golden Age Wonder Woman stories, the amazons only relate to two deities: Athena and Aphrodite. The only male deity in the stories, Ares, who is called by his Roman name, Mars, is the amazons’ enemy. Later, more contemporary Wonder Woman comics (from the 1980s on) changed this, so that Mercury figures strongly in more recent comics, and Diana and her sisters acknowledge the supremacy of Zeus—an unlikely act for a matriarchal culture.

21 And the world of girls can scare the pants off boys. In *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, Jules Feiffer writes: “. . . I can’t comment on the image girls had of Wonder Woman. I never knew they read her—or any comic book. That *girls* had a preference for my brand of literature would have

been more of a frightening image to me than any number of men being beaten up by Wonder Woman.”

22 Page 244.

23 More recent statistics are not encouraging. An article by Kate Raphael from the *San Francisco Sentinel*, October 11, 1990, reports that almost half of married women are beaten at least once by their husbands.

24 This information comes from the Women’s College Coalition website, www.academic.org/surprise.html.

25 *Girls’ Crystal Annual* from 1956, 1958, and 1963; *School Friend Annual* from 1958.

26 Coincidentally, the first superheroine in American Comics, The Woman in Red (1940), costumed herself in a hooded robe and mask.

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Trina Robbins is a pop culture herstorian who has written about every aspect of comics that concerns women. She’s also written about dark goddesses, women who kill, and Irish women. WisCon 16 GoH.

www.trinarobbins.com

Suzy McKee Charnas

Q: Why did you go to your first WisCon? What keeps you coming back?

A: I haven't a clue why I first went or even what year it was. I might be able to dig up a file somewhere, out in the garage, but don't count on it. At any rate, my first WisCon might have been the year that we arrived during a blizzard and experienced real WisConsin ice for the first time. (Dave Hartwell kept me from flying off my feet coming down the State Street Hill at night, ice on everything.)

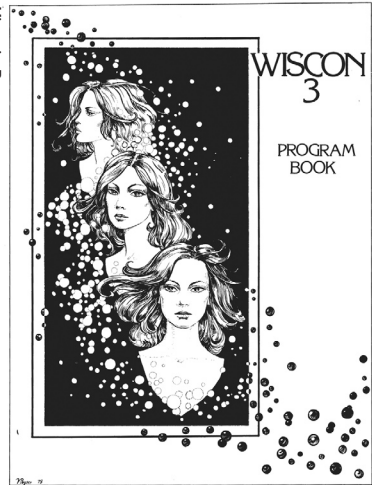
As to what kept me coming back—well, every year I could look forward to the excitement of meeting people—new ones, often, which told me that the books were still alive and drawing in readers—who'd not only read my work *and* the work of other women I was reading, but who could talk brilliantly and passionately about all of it (plus their own writing, in many cases). Then there was the delicious sense of having a place to bitch and moan freely about all the various unfairnesses of life in sf for women writers, readers, and fans, and the sheer joy of being with so many articulate women with the gloves off, not hesitating for fear of drawing fire from a guy hidden in the back of the room (or even some angry reactionary woman).

This was also the first venue in which I got to know lots of people in different states and stages of gender—gay male sympathizers, lesbians flying under their own flag and proud of it, straights like me, transgenders in all stages of change, the works. My head was regularly spun: you don't run into this kind of variety on a free and frank basis in high school academia, where I'd done most of my professional work before moving to New Mexico to write full time. I learned a lot of things, not always welcome but always of use and of interest, just by listening.

There are thriving gay communities in NM, of course, but I'm like most folks—I tend to hang with people more or less like myself, absent a good kick up the butt. WisCon was a New World (it still is). I was an sf buff; of course I was into exploring new worlds, in a time and place dedicated to that very activity.

And the books! And the panels—all those subjects that the fan-boy cons never considered worth bothering with, that even more serious conventions conceded to with mere sidebars (“Women in SF,” what a superficial cop-out). In

Victoria Poyser



a way, WisCon made it okay to go to some of the other male-dominant default conventions, because I knew there was this meeting once a year where the core of my own concerns would be addressed *as if it were central*, not an “add-on,” just to keep them quiet, you know. And the people, the newcomers starry-eyed at having discovered the Secret City of Real True Questions, the veterans so glad to return again after another year in the world of macho make-believe that spawns such a ghastly reality for us all—irresistible.

And then there’s the hotel—friendly, unfazed by oddity, in the midst of a university neighborhood with cheap food and clothes and bookstores and fudge. Sheesh, who wouldn’t welcome a yearly chance to visit A Room of One’s Own, one of the premier feminist bookstores in a country of ever fewer feminist bookstores? All honor to the Room’s women!

And then, of course, there’s Jeanne Gomoll—a woman of organized energy, playful spirit, and a grounded thoughtfulness that illuminates and calms everything around her. Frankly, I’d have gone anywhere that Jeanne and Scott & Co. ran a convention, knowing that I’d be treated well, put to work in creative and rewarding ways that would make the most of my being present, kicked into new thoughts and questions, and helped where I needed help. In fact the years that I skipped WisCon were the years that Jeanne & Co *weren’t* at the helm (though I didn’t begrudge her the rest-time one bit—she’d earned it a hundred times over).

The thing is, with the establishment of the Tiptree Award in particular, WisCon became more than ever the living hub of feminist sf. How the hell could I have stayed away? These are my friends, my colleagues, my best critics, the readers I write for, the people in publishing who understand what sf is and might be for free-minded women and men. I’ll be coming back as long as it stays that way, and as long as I can remember stuff well enough to book a flight and a hotel room in time...

Suzy McKee Charnas has racked up a dozen-plus books, a stage play, various awards, and a number of stints teaching sf/f writing and reading since her first novel in 1974, and is a WisCon regular. WisCon 3 GoH.

www.suzymckeecharnas.com

Welcome Back to the Beginning

Rachel Swirsky

Last year, feminist science fiction fans gathered in Madison to celebrate the thirtieth WisCon. A lot of things *have* changed in thirty years—there are more women in political positions, third-wave feminism has made more space for the voices of women of color, feminist blogs have made networking on the internet both easier and less personal. Yet, thirty years after the first WisCon, a question that should have been settled long ago remains a hot topic. Does sexism exist in science fiction?

As I write this, approximately one hundred women genre writers are preparing to submit a “slush bomb” to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* on August 18, the anniversary of women’s suffrage. They do so out of varying motives. Some want to encourage more women to submit their work, in the hope that this will even out the gender imbalances in the slush. Some wish to encourage a sense of community. Others will watch the responses trickle in, thinking of it as an experiment. Still others are mostly looking to have fun.

What interests me as a feminist writer is less the slush bomb itself than the debate it has generated on genre blogs. Many respondents seem appalled by what they see as allegations of overt sexism leveled against Gordon Van Gelder, the editor of *F&SF*. In blog posts and comments, some have expressed outrage that a gendered submission effort is under consideration, laying all blame for gender disparities in science fiction at the feet of women themselves. Women, apparently, don’t submit enough. We aren’t competitive enough. We aren’t interested in the right themes. Our writing fails to be universal.

Other bloggers refuse to acknowledge that gender disparities in science fiction exist in the first place. Why are feminists always harping on gender? Don’t we know it’s sexist to analyze success rates in terms of gender?

Admittedly, most people have responded to the slush bomb with more complex and subtle reactions than I’ve presented here. But as I peruse sf blogs, I find myself astonished to find, over and over again, that the conversation has skipped all the way back to square one—does male privilege exist? In the post-sixties era, shouldn’t we understand that this is a patriarchal, sexist society, one in which the standards of success have been designed by and for white, educated, heterosexual, cisgendered males?

I have an ambivalent response to this year’s slush-bomb effort as it has been framed thus far. I plan to participate, but I’m wary of those who would look at it as an experiment.

The bomb is not controlled. It's not going to yield scientific data. I'm also not sure that I agree with the way the debate has been framed around sex rather than gender—I see bias against femininity as being a more critical factor in editorial selection than bias against women, though of course the two are related. Likewise, I think it's important to engage with the system of privilege that tells us masculine writing is better than feminine writing, rather than focusing on the term “sexism,” which is morally loaded and can imply apportioning of blame to individuals.

Perhaps my most important reservation is that I worry about centering the whole debate on a single magazine like *F&SF*. It makes that magazine seem unusual. I don't believe it is.

I have voiced these feelings in blog discussions, but I'm not sure how effective my participation is. In an environment where even the existence of sexism remains up for debate, maybe more basic groundwork must be laid before there's a point in discussing what factors create the privileging of masculine work. Before one can talk about the ways in which female narratives are embodied, one has to explain how men are constructed as universal, how women are othered, how female bodies are conflated with sex. One must explain Feminism 101. Again and again.

At WisCon, the discussion can advance further. We don't have to reinvent the feminist wheel. We can begin with the knowledge that patriarchy is deeply embedded in the American mindset and then proceed to seek ways to analyze and chip away at the patriarchy, using our fictions and imaginations as our tools.

...or can we?

To the extent that feminism is an individual project—or even a collective project on a small scale—we can. Working toward frame-breaking moments where one can conceive outside the normative values of our society is certainly a laudable goal. Environments like WisCon help foster these revelations. Every once in a while, they can also be inscribed in fiction; novels like *Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Female Man* are, in a way, frame-breaking experiences frozen in text so that they can be communicated across time and space.

Yet, to the extent that feminism is a society-level project, aimed at altering the basic assumptions of the culture, I'm not sure we're ready to move on from the basic exercises. In that wide world beyond WisCon, Feminism 101 still needs to be taught. Before we can take the social conversation as a whole in the direction of analysis and problem-solving, we have to force people to acknowledge our concerns. The problem must be named and identified and explained. We're still in the consciousness raising phase.

We're back at the beginning.

In the modern backlash, these obviously aren't new problems. But while I know that feminists have struggled for decades with the problem of moving from the theoretical world where possibility abounds into the practical world where ignorance breathes, I remain dissatisfied.

Change lingers out of reach. Women heroes appear on the covers of novels—but in cheesecake poses. Women’s work wins awards—but it is not reprinted. We send slush bombs—but the conversations spin on their heels, coming back to, “Does sexism exist?”

How much of our activist lives is doomed to repeating these cycles? To proving the same things over and over again to the same recalcitrant public? To battling over issues our mothers thought solved? To re-laying the theoretical foundations that allow us to fumble through the baby steps of minor change? To throwing ourselves against impenetrable walls of ego and denial? To reiterating that the personal is political and that women are subjects as well as objects?

To answering that same damn question.

Yes, sexism exists.

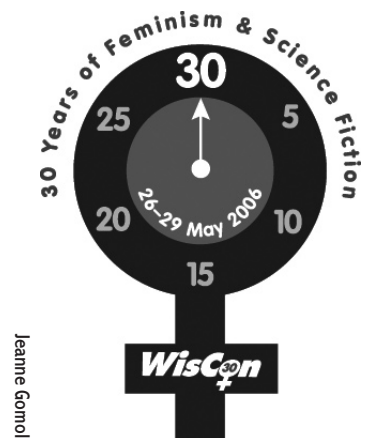
This time do you think we can remember?

Rachel Swirsky is an MFA student at the Iowa Writers Workshop, and a graduate of Clarion West 2005. She has short work appearing in markets including *Subterranean Magazine*, *Electric Velocipede*, and *Escape Pod*.

Her feminist fable, “Heartstrung,” is forthcoming in *Interzone 210*.

Along with science fiction and fantasy writer Ann Leckie, Rachel is running this year’s slush bomb, which will be launched in the direction of *Analog Science Fiction & Fact* on August 18, 2007. Details are available at her website.

<http://www.rachelswirsky.com/>



Feminist Think Tanks

Transcript Notes by Liz Henry
with redactions by the participants

Panel Description

For decades WisCon has been an annual three- or four-day think tank for feminist sf: people descend on Madison from all over North America and the world to pool ideas, experiences, and reading lists. These ingredients catch fire, combine in new ways, and are carried out into the world by recharged participants. In the wider world, feminism has been diluted into a laundry list of “women’s issues,” and feminists have dispersed into various movements and local projects. Many of us are isolated from each other, from recent feminist history, and from grassroots theory-making. What if feminism had a year-round WisCon? How would it work? Should it happen?

Panelists

Vonda N. McIntyre (moderator), L. Timmel Duchamp, Liz Henry (replacing Laura Quilter), Janet Lafler, Susanna J. Sturgis, undisclosed panelist

Writers and Works Cited

- ✦ Simone de Beauvoir quotation
- ✦ Andrea Dworkin’s *Right Wing Women*
- ✦ Jane Jacobs—the particular work SS was thinking about was *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.
- ✦ Ursula K. Le Guin
- ✦ *New York Review of Books* article
- ✦ Bernice Johnson Reagon speech, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).
- ✦ Adrienne Rich, “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

[Editor's note: These notes are not a verbatim transcript. They have been corrected by some (though not all) of the panelists and have been abridged or supplemented for clarity.]

VNM: [...introduction...]

LH: [...brief description of the feminist sf wiki...]

LTD: I'm the author of a lot of short fiction and several books, most recently *Renegade*, the second novel of the five-volume Marq'ssan Cycle; nonacademic critic, whose essays have appeared in *NYRSF*, *Extrapolation*, *Foundation*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*; and publisher of Aqueduct Press, which publishes feminist science fiction.

I'm interested in the difference a year-round think-tank could make to (a) feminist thinking itself and (b) to political culture generally (if such a thing as political culture doesn't become virtually extinct in the US, as I'm currently thinking it might soon do). Think tanks have exercised an enormous influence on life in the US for decades. And the lack of feminist think tanks has meant that voices speaking from a feminist perspective have been largely absent in the dominant political discourse of the US.

SS: This past winter I was writing something for a WisCon grant application, about why WisCon is so important, and I wrote that WisCon was like a four-day feminist think tank. From that it was a small step to "what would a feminist think tank look like?"—and here we are. At WisCon you don't have to explain over and over again why feminism is important or why science fiction is important, and that's how we're able to push the subject so much further in so many different directions. That's the kind of thing that could happen with a feminist think tank—it would be like a pressure cooker for feminist ideas. It would enable feminists around the country and the world to share news and ideas, and it would help us keep in touch with our own history. It amazes me how much has been forgotten in just the last twenty or thirty years.

UP: [...feminism and women's issues and problems reframed in last twenty years as individual problems we're supposed to go off and solve on our own...]

VNM: [...standing on the shoulders of Le Guin, etc.; door openers for us...] We want to keep opening those doors for others and future generations.

JL: [...background in anthropology; fan; no position in community except what people think of her; interested in intersections of political and social issues...] Ideally that's what think tanks are for.

LH: I'm filling in for Laura Quilter, whose flight was delayed, at her request since we collaborate a lot and have talked about these ideas. We wanted to talk about the

virtual aspect of the feminist think tank, the online components, like mailing lists, blogs, and wikis. We could hold virtual events with online chats. All this information can live on the web and be accessible to anyone with computer access. Consciousness-raising has to keep happening over and over, and that can happen in online discussions. We have the FEM-SF list, Laura Quilter's Feminist Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Utopia site, which is an amazing archive; the Whileaway and WisCon communities on LiveJournal; the Feminist SF Wiki at <http://wiki.feministsf.org>, the Book Discussion group, and more. Think tanks can be events, events that are documented. They are "instances of" the perpetual feminist think tank. Documentation and being public are important for us to be part of public discourse.

LTD: I think bringing feminist economists and feminist political scientists and other feminist scholars of social and political policy together with WisCon fans, authors, and scholars, could bring about a wave of powerful activism, especially if the think tank included not only feminist "experts" and artists (including writers and performers) but a wide spectrum of other feminist women as well. I do think that publishing papers would serve an important purpose, but then I don't see the need to make a choice between either "experts" producing papers or "non-expert" feminist activists. Also, I think an in-body, away-from-the-constant-demanding-press-of-the-hectic-lives-most-of-us-lead setting for at least some of the participant's involvement with the think tank would be crucial. For many of us, anything that takes place online just becomes another entry on the list of tasks to be triaged. One wants to contribute to wikis, but doing so is an anonymous, socially disconnected experience that takes place in isolation—sort of like leaving a poem or a ten-dollar bill on a park bench and hoping the person who finds it appreciates it, since it is hard to believe anyone will read one's wiki contribution much less care that someone made it. I'd like to see a feminist think-tank modeled on some of the math institutes I've heard about—places where people can go for varying lengths of time to work intensively and brainstorm and network, where activities include talks, panel discussions, thinking and writing time, and many opportunities for good conversation. A place for conferences and talks. Where people can drop in. And are invited to do residencies there. In addition, we also need a virtual community. But the physical institute provides face-to-face conversation and is really important. You have to get away from your daily life. If it's only online it becomes less important and just another burden. This is an important lesson of WisCon. And we have every sort of person across the spectrum of feminism. Scientists, writers,...who have life experiences; artists, performers, every kind of feminist of every age and experience. It's the conversation and making connections that can really work powerfully for us.

SS: I came in on the tail end of consciousness-raising. It was the core of '60s and '70s feminism. Great mechanism. We lost something really important when it dwindled. One reason it dwindled—we thought that once your consciousness was raised, it was raised for good. We didn't register that consciousness-raising goes on all your life, and that there are always new people coming into the movement. The people who came after us did not get the excitement of figuring out the connections between personal and political and building the skills to run hotlines, women's centers, publishing companies.... By then we were the experts and the people coming in later became the secretaries.

LH: We can have un conferences, brain jams, events, house parties—declare it and make a physical face-to-face event and then document the hell out of it and put it on the web. We want to have events like wiki-editing house parties. And take photos and write up everything and post that information. Grace Davis and I declared we were having Woolfcamp, a weekend-long un conference, and forty people ended up at her house for the weekend. We got together, made a rough schedule, decided on the spot what we wanted to talk about; mostly issues around blogging, computer tools, creativity, and gender; then split up into groups. There's a wiki (http://www.socialtext.net/woolfcamp/index.cgi?workspace_for_woolfcamp_santa_cruz_february_2006) and a blog (woolfcamp2006.blogspot.com/) for it, and we're going to do that again. We came out of that weekend with a tremendous amount of validation and energy and knowledge.

SS: Yeah.

LTD: But we really need the physical institute.

UP: It is important that...What Susanna said about the early CR-feminist movement and free love—I got pregnant at 19. The world became different and issues became different. When I was juggling trying to raise kids and daily life, the academic argument became irrelevant and dysfunctional. What I see is the think tank becoming this room. Go back to your communities you're from, even if they're not feminist communities. I work for a bank. My president knows I'm going to a feminist sf conference and he's fascinated. Male, white fifty-year-old bank president; you CAN have that conversation with them.

LH: That is a different thing than the focus and push forward and not having to explain feminism...

UP: We need both.

Aud: We need both! There's not an either/or.

SS: There's almost no good idea that can't get screwed up by group dynamics.

[laughter]

VNM: [...]

- JL: Taking these ideas and transforming them into action. Conservative think tanks. Heritage Foundation, etc. How to frame the core of idea and then funnel that into media outlets with which they are affiliated...
- LTD: There are other think tanks though. Funded and run by the right wing...
- JL: Yes, there are. But the right wing is more powerful at this point. Part of that is having easy access to get their ideas out into the mainstream. One of the strategies is that if you have an idea that is perceived as outlandish, your goal is to make it seem merely radical, and then reasonable: to normalize it.
- Aud: I think of the times I see that [normalizing] happen with ideas I find horrible and unthinkable... Feminist ideas that I love should be pushed more into the mainstream.
- VNM: The strategy can be co-opted for good. Just because a thing is evil doesn't mean the process is evil.
- JL: [...an article in the *New York Review of Books* mentioning Jane Jacobs—urbanist, deep critic of urban design in early the '60s...] Jacobs was self-taught, largely, wrote on the death and life of great American cities, and was an activist for rest of her life.
- Aud: She stopped them building the highway through Manhattan, through the Village.
- JL: She just died a few weeks ago. *The New York Review of Books* article includes a list of important women thinkers of the twentieth century—a really weird list: Jane Jacobs, Rachel Carson, Julia Child, Betty Friedan. The thing that linked them in the mind of the article's writer is that they had a deep appreciation of the forms of everyday life. That would be an interesting approach right there.
- SS: I read Jane Jacobs when I was in college, in the early 1970s, and it made me look at how space affects how people relate to each other, or don't relate to each other.
- Aud: Does Martha Stewart qualify for this think tank?
[laughter]
- UP: This happens in media over and over—our questions and interests get reframed. When Carly Fiorina lost her CEO job, there were articles [asking the question] over and over: would they ever give a woman a CEO job again?. So then when Eisner lost his job, I looked and looked... [There was] no article on a man getting a CEO job again...
[laughter]
- SS: It did not take a huge number of people to take over the Republican Party. But there is nothing on the left, there isn't that gravitational pull; there is nothing keeping the Democratic Party [from being pulled to the right]. One of the mistakes from my youth: we latched on to a good idea and didn't get it that diversity

was key. People can pursue a goal in different valid ways. Many things have to be going on at once [in the] ongoing battles in feminism. Consider the era of separatism—we didn't all have to be separatists. Just having a pool of people who were experimenting on the edge kept [those of] us who were closer to the middle asking questions, like "Am I making too many concessions? Am I giving up too much?" Not everyone has to go off and live on the land or give up sex or have sex all the time. The existence of such people increases the range of our imagination. Today we are missing that so much...

Aud: [The Left...]

SS: And so much of that is happening on the right.

LTD: The far right has got just 15 percent of the public supporting them.

Aud: Participatory democracy is harder than authoritarianism. It's got to incorporate so many divergent views, which is why we look sloppy.

Aud 2: The far right wing keeps the other members of the Republican party in fear of losing power. So the moderate Republicans are cowed.

LTD: They've got a real punishment system. It's ruthless.

Aud: They've got the power of naming.

LH: Is naming the problem?

Aud: It's not just naming. Liberals, feminists—we've been abandoned by the Democratic Party. We need to identify ourselves as feminist as much as possible.

VNM: And counter the propositions they make up.

Aud: We don't use the "radical feminist" label.

Aud 2: There IS a feminist think tank out there. The Grace Hopper yearly conference, women in technology... Five years later she got funding for the Anita Borg Institute. They give grants to further issues of women in technology. It's partly virtual, and there are also conferences.

VNM: God, what a perfect match for a bunch of science-fiction women.

Aud: She had a brain tumor and died a few years ago, and the institute is still going. And no one in this room has heard of it. I wonder why it is that no one here knows about it? Why is it invisible?

SS: People who are active even in feminist print, if they don't know anything about feminism and sf and fantasy they probably don't know about WisCon. I'm still explaining what WisCon is to feminist print activists.

LH: People paying attention to each other's work is what makes something important, and that they do so in public. [...the importance of public discourse to feminism...] If you think something is important, and if you like it, talk about

it. Online, talk about it and link to it. Participate in a visible way in public conversations. Women on email lists, back-channeling their support to each other; they need to do it out in the open where that collective power can be seen. And so much work that's already been done needs to get online, to go digital, we need good databases in open formats, and to have our information in the mix online, or we're going to lose more of our history. Do you know, in my twenties I carried around this tattered old copy of the magazine *Notes from the Second Year* and read it till it fell apart? A friend of mine had stolen it from the library and left it at my house. Where is it now? That's crucial information and history. Put that feminist sf fanzine you did back in the '70s online, and there will be fourteen year olds in Texas or Japan who read it and will get inspiration and strength from it, and feminism in their life will happen faster. They'll have this conversation to build on now, not when they're forty or sixty. Also, the key thing I'd like to say about young feminists is, please listen to them. You have to listen, and not judge them by where you are or were, because things are different for them. The biggest gift some of my feminist mentors gave me was not lecturing, but listening to my ideas, even if from their point of view, I was reinventing the wheel. Listen to young feminists' ideas and give them the gift of taking them seriously. Are you listening, or are you trying so hard to pass on history that you forget to listen?

Aud: [...power of language; using their own language, framing; not doing it on others' terms...]

LTD: Where we are now, it's important to create alternatives rather than just being oppositional.

Aud: [...anti-abortion vs. pro-choice; language; the loaded use of the word "innocent" ...]

[*general hubbub ensues about the use of the phrase "taking of innocent life"*]

Aud 2: [...should we reclaim the word *feminism* or not? Humanist Simone de Beauvoir stressed the importance of recognizing women as human beings; what is feminism about? External navel gazing?]

[*laughter*]

Aud 3: I was assuming people were thinking about things the way that I do. But I grew up reading sf books that belonged to my daddy... My imagination is far out there...1000 years in the future

[...people as uneducated, irrational arguments...]

I don't get why they're doing what they're doing, so I'm not effective in debate.

UP: There is a basic difference in ways people process information. One thing that confuses me is I can't see this piece without seeing this and this and this...

Aud: Well, DUH!

UP: But most people can not only focus on just that one piece; they don't see anything else [besides that one piece]. And one woman I had problems communicating with had never understood that a whole is not the sum of its parts, it's how they interconnect... The point I want to get back to is that we have the right-wing manipulation of the world around us, and the terms come down to that simple issue...because people make decisions on that simple issue.

SS: Andrea Dworkin wrote *Right Wing Women*, a really interesting book. I haven't read it since 1985. Her basic point was that she found the women she talked to who espoused very different right-wing views basically understood things like the dynamics between men and women in a way that was not very different than the way left and radical and feminist women understood them. But the right-wing women were much more pessimistic about things ever changing. Where I live I don't know many feminists, and I hardly know anyone who reads f/sf. If it weren't for online communication, I'd feel very isolated and probably a lot more pessimistic about the possibility of change. This is my first WisCon in eight years, and I'm struck by the sheer sense of possibility that WisCon creates. In my guest of honor speech at WisCon 21 (1997) I quoted from a presentation Bernice Johnson Reagon gave in 1981. She made a distinction there that's important for activists, the distinction between a home and a coalition. We tended to expect coalitions to be like a home, but they aren't. The coalition and political work is not nurturing and calm. You need a home base to support and energize you while you do that work. It can be a family home, a WisCon, or a group of people who support you. You need that to keep you going, but you can't spend all your time there.

Aud: You need a very long rope...to get out [to] all those different places...but [one that's] a tether.

SS: The physical place, the think tank, the connections, are important. The possibility of doing that is greater than it ever has been.

Aud: There's a guy who said, "Well, there really aren't any women's issues anymore..." and a guy who said he is anti-abortion... How do we answer these people? And the young people who think that feminism fixed everything, or didn't fix it, but either way, that it's done? [How do we answer them?]

Aud 2: [Cites examples of positive local efforts: a girl who does hip-hop; young feminists; a positive step on a local level, not visible to everyone, but there...]

SS: I think CR is still very much needed. CR is something that can be done anywhere. Women come together to talk about what they're seeing and thinking and feeling about their lives, then they move on to "what are the problems here and what can we do about them."

UP: *[asks Liz her experience as a young feminist]*

LH: I'm almost forty, married twice, one kid and two miscarriages, somehow not feeling like I qualify as a "young feminist" anymore over here. Young feminists are people young enough to be my children. I was raised in the '70s to think that feminism had fixed everything and we'd all be equal. It was devastating to me in 1980 when the ERA didn't pass. As a teenager I wished I had more connection with other feminists; I needed mentors and connections and information. I think young feminists now have the potential to make those connections on the web. And that's what they're doing, if you look at the feminist blogosphere. If you go looking, you find stuff like Feministing (<http://feministing.com/>), Feministe (<http://feministe.us/blog/>), BitchPhD (<http://bitchphd.blogspot.com/>), blac(k)ademic (<http://www.blackademic.com/>), Angry Black Woman (<http://theangryblackwoman.wordpress.com/>), Pandagon (<http://pandagon.net/>). Those are just the biggest ones that come to mind off the top of my head.

Aud: The US is in an undeclared civil war, [caught up in] a fear economy. I am trying to counter it with a love economy. Doing that clarifies [the situation]. What kind of future do you want to live in...?

Aud 2: Capitalism is automatically "justification" for anything.

Aud 3: [...something about workers and Marx...] When I tried to educate myself about feminist issues, I was going back to books ten and twenty years old. The think tank needs to be new. We need manifesting and calls to arms for *this* generation.

Aud 4 [Rosaleen Love]: In 1999 and again in 2000 I was invited to Seattle for two meetings organized by the Foundation for the Future, a group established by wealthy individuals to consider the long-term future of humanity. We met to talk about the future in one thousand years, a fascinatingly frustrating and challenging exercise. The group was not particularly feminist, as I recall. I was part of a think tank organized by a rich man in Seattle. We were gathered to think about our areas of expertise and the future in 1000 years time. It wasn't called "feminist," but it was fascinating. The brains who are the brains of the universe.

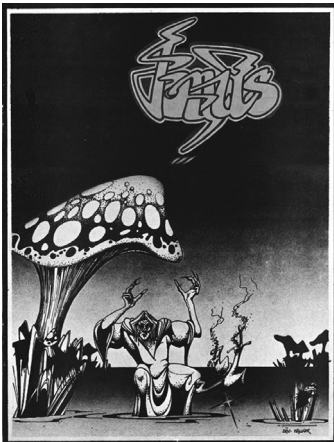
Aud 5: Feminism is recent, fragile. In an instant, you can lose everything. We must never lose sight of that.

LH: So, the wiki and Laura Quilter's FSFFU pages. Laura built the FSFFU pages over many years, with lots of people contributing information. We wanted to rebuild those pages and that information with a group and see what happens differently in the collaborative process. Laura Q or I will show anyone who wants at WisCon how to edit the wiki. Anyone can edit it.

- Aud: What to do to make sure there are more women leaders? And all these women who are doing stuff are not [being] identified as feminist. The positive glowing feeling that people take in success needs to be represented as feminist.
- SS: Adrienne Rich says in “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying” that when a woman speaks the truth she makes it possible for more truth around her... Deep down, I don’t believe people have changed that much... The tiny minority just has more permission to speak.
- Aud: I heard on the radio a week or so ago that the part of the population least likely to go vote is unmarried young women.
- Aud: Pat Murphy told me a story. Twenty years ago, she said, she saw a tabloid headline: “Eighteen of your senators are space aliens.” Her first thought was that there are more space aliens than women in the Senate. The day that we have more women than space aliens in the US Senate...

Afterword

- SS: Ever since the WisCon panel, the idea of a feminist think tank has never been far from my mind. Feminism has lost its edge in the last twenty years or so. It’s lost some of its depth and breadth, and an alarming amount of its recent history. These days many people seem to see feminism as a laundry list of particular issues, or as the commendable but oversimplified notion that “women are people too.” To me feminism is a way of looking at the world that places women in the foreground. No other political or cultural movement, no philosophy, and no monotheistic theology does that. None of us have much practice doing it, and our attempts are widely dismissed or attacked as hostility to men. We need a lot more practice at envisioning women in the foreground, and we need more spaces—physical, psychological, and/or virtual—where we don’t have to be continually justifying what we’re doing. I still don’t know what a feminist think tank would look like, but I believe that it should provide such a space and encourage the creation of more such spaces.



Eric Wallner

Liz Henry has published poems, translations, reviews, stories, and essays in Poetry Flash, strange Horizons, other, Two Lines, Suspect Thoughts, Cipactli, Lodestar Quarterly, and Literary Mama. She blogs at <http://liz-henry.blogspot.com/>

A Think Tank Thing for Feminists

Rosaleen Love

Little did I know when I first started along the feminist path that the future of feminism was going to be all about men.

Even if I'd known, I would have said,

*that's OK. I'm cool with that. If it's going to be all about men,
then men will have seen the feminist light, and that's a good thing.*

Or, I might have said,

*typical. What did you expect?
Smashing the patriarchy was never going to be easy. Co-optation is a tool of power.
And no prizes for guessing who'll be co-opting whom.*

Those unintended consequences, they get you every time.

What *WERE* we thinking? Seems to me, back then when consciousness-raising was all the go, we thought that it was something that just had to be done once. Human consciousness, look, it's been raised! People agree! Discrimination against women is unfair! And while we're at it, there are all kinds of other discrimination, on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, disability, you name it, and they're unfair too! Let's all be people of good will and get together and sort this out.

Once and for all.
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We set out to reclaim the importance of everyday life. We'd point to the play of power in everyday relationships, and first other women, then men, would see what it's all about, and we'd all reach some universal agreement. It would be a kinder, gentler way of smashing the patriarchy, but it would be smashed, nonetheless, and life on earth for all would only improve.

What I didn't know then: consciousness may be raised, in some places in some times. People would learn to say:

*of course, that's unfair, that's discrimination. That's unreasonable. That's got to go. Discrimination. Institutionalized bullying, in the workplace, or in relationships. Out. It's wrong.*

Consciousness may be raised—that did happen, for a time. But then, somehow, consciousness gets flattened again. All that work it took to keep it raised! Or else, it deflates, *p000-000f* slowly, as the energy to raise it high is spent, and then it goes, slowly, silently, without anyone noticing much.

Until the unreasonable *slinks* back in.  
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It's discriminatory, yes, lawyers will argue. You can see the way issues get taken over and twisted to other ends. But is it unreasonable? No. For the definition of what is reasonable is subtly changed, and in ways that spell danger for those who were starting to relax, those who thought themselves safe.

Not so long ago, women were automatically paid less than men, because men were men, and women were women, and that was the way of the world. Then came the call for "Equal pay for equal work." And "fair go" seemed utterly reasonable.

Fair go, women feed children: fair go, women need money for everyday life:

fair go, women pay rent: fair go, women need to save for a rainy day.

Seems reasonable. Seems only fair.

Yes, equal pay for equal work. What is equal work? What about the boss who runs the company, and the cleaner? No, that's not equal work. The cleaner is often a woman, and the boss invariably a man. No equal pay for them. What about the laborer in the coal mine, and the nurse in hospital? No, that's not equal work. Digging coal is hard and dangerous. Looking after sick people, how dangerous is that? No equal pay for them. Isn't that just like the power of the patriarchy, to take our good ideas about equality and screw them up to justify inequality.

"Equal pay for equal work." At first it means something. Or so people imagine. Then, little by little, it gets watered down. Equality is all very well for the good times, but what about the bad? The bad times have come. Nations must be competitive, and if competition means temporary kinds of unfairness, so be it. It's all in the cause of a transition to a better future for all, where all can compete in the New World Order that's coming, ready or not. What does it mean, equal pay—with women in the factory cities of China?

Get real, the bosses say. But as for pay for the bosses? Aha, they, too, are competitive in the world market place. But for them it works the other way 'round. Their pay must rise to dizzying heights to compete with executive pay, internationally. In the name of global competitiveness, the bosses get more and the workers get less.

It's all so very nineteenth century.
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So that's point number one. Consciousness gets raised, and then it's flattened by the wicked multinationals—whatever—take your pick, and then it's the slide back down into the abyss.

What to do about it? We need a feminist think tank, said Susanna Sturgis at WisCon 30. WisCon itself is already a feminist think tank. But WisCon happens once a year. How best to keep that energy alive from day-to-day, year-to-year? Susanna's voice came

through loud and clear. She wanted a feminist think tank that would be a year-round feminist presence.

The think tanks already in existence have disproportionate influence, given their narrow membership: conservative and male, for the most part. They make themselves sound really impressive, with names like The Institute of Public Affairs. The think tank injects policy ideas into the political process, into the media, whatever—as if its ideas are the only ones that matter. Furthermore, they make money this way. They can even sell their ideas to governments, though we only get to hear about this when they get caught, as with the recent exposure, in the *Sunday Times*, of the practices of the Institute for Public Policy Research in Great Britain.

Why should the men have all the think tanks, occupy ∞ so much space ∞ in the media, get the best invitations?

Women need to make themselves sound equally impressive. How about an Institute for Feminist Public Policy Research? Perhaps it's that word "feminist" that puts them off, the men in power. Should we use some other word, perhaps? How about The Feminist Think Tank and Ideas Storage Facility? Or, The Institute for Post-Male-Chauvinist Public Policy Research? Names matter.

A think tank needs so much money, to bring expensive people together and keep them in comfort while they pontificate. Feminists want that, too. But who will pay for it? That's a question we were left pondering.

Timmi Duchamp wants the physical institute. Liz Henry aimed for something cheaper, and as feminists, doing it on the cheap is our kind of thing. She listed mini-conferences such as Woolf camp, "unconferences," brain jams, house-parties—the kinds of things friends can organize amongst themselves. They meet locally, document what happens, then put it on the web. For Liz Henry this would be "the virtual part of thinktankitude."



Rhizomes, from a tank: roots, from a hunk of metal? Mixed-up metaphors. Metaphors: words that work in the world. Aha! I think I'm moving towards a kind of solution for Susanna Sturgis. Not the money angle, as yet. It's the "tank" angle that's starting to attract my attention. A think tank that moves, in war, guns blazing with the *splat-splat-splat* of good ideas popping out like bullets, non-lethal, that penetrate the body-armor of the patriarchy, bringing it to its knees—creating holes through which will seep the ideals of equality, sisterhood, and liberty. In the nicest possible way. Nice, but persistent with it. Nice, but insistent with it. A humanist think tank, a thinker's think tank, a think tank for movers and shakers, a think tank for stirrers. A think tank that generates momentum for change, creating a forward thrust, all the things that real tanks do, except roll over people and kill them. A feminist think tank is not of that ilk.





Another thing happened at WisCon 30. A transgender woman said she'd lost her job and suffered discrimination in employment because she was a woman. Previously loquacious panelists gave a silent, surprised, sideways look. You could tell it wasn't just me having a *Whoa!* reaction.

Discrimination on the grounds of being a woman is claimed by someone who is not an actual woman, who was not born an actual woman, and who did not have the experience of growing up as an actual woman. But at some stage in her adult life, she changed gender. So what just didn't feel right about her statement? And why didn't I spring to my feet and say, *Hey, wait on!*

I decided it was something to do with marginality. I wanted to say,

*My marginality is not your marginality.*

*Even if you think so. Even if you say so.*

No, that's not it. The thing I've come to realize, is, you just can't choose your species of marginality and expect others to agree. The transgender woman on the panel has to a certain extent chosen her gender, or has been chosen by it. She perceives herself in a certain light. But she can't then choose the reasons why others might describe her as "on the margin." Her perception is that others judge her as a woman, where they may be saying something more like: Transgender, that's too weird for me. No matter. When the axe falls next in the workplace, it falls on her.

I'd really like my marginality, as I see it, to be recognized. But it won't be. They won't say they're sacking me because I'm a woman and I don't fit in. No, the bosses will say, they're sacking me because my job is surplus to requirements. There's nothing I can do about their perceptions of me. I place one label on myself, others stick another, and it's the person with power who wins out. The person without it is the one who walks.

*You're being fired because you're just no good.*

*I am being discriminated against because I am a woman.*

*You are being picked out against because you are too weird.*

Wavelength. That's one part of it. We're not on each other's wavelength. Wavelength, in this context, is a metaphor.

Remember how once, in the universities, there was this subject called Women's Studies, and that was a breakthrough? Then it transmuted into Gender Studies, because, hey, let's not exclude the other, and before you knew it, it became Queer Studies, because we're all queer, and then... This transition marked a way of saying that the previous focus on the gender division between women and men was too restrictive, and that was all very well for a while, but now, moving into the future, identity politics is not enough.

Metaphors:

wavelength

raised consciousness

think-tanks.





I started off thinking the future of feminism has turned out to be all about men, but that's only the beginning.

Moving on, moving on...

The astronomer Paul Davies is setting up a “cosmic think tank” at Arizona State University. I reckon this is something we feminists can sneak up on. The cosmic think tank, Davies reports, is designed “to address all the Really Big Questions, such as how the universe came to exist, why it is so uncannily suited for life, are we alone, what is the destiny of mankind etc.” A good strategic principle is to get with the strength. What the cosmic think tank needs is cosmic feminism. The questions we can pose include: how the universe came to exist with women in it; why it is so uncannily suited for life, and its myriad methods of reproducing the species; how gender is related to the cosmic destiny of humankind; are we alone in the universe, and might there be a better way to organise the universe along gender-inclusive lines?

The idea is to move beyond one recent dominant paradigm that reduces women's issues to problems the individual has to cope with on her own. Feminist thinktankitude says,

No way we're going to go through all this in every generation, each woman for herself re-inventing the social wheel. Social and political worlds intersect; women are in the wider world of power relations, not separate from it. From the feminist think tank, subterranean rootlets will shoot out, interconnectedly-rhizomatic, popping up under the feet of the patriarchy, tripping it up, sliding all over its pulsing body, seeking its juicy open orifices, slithering into the patriarchal brain, there to inoculate gender-inclusive ideas as the basis for better ways of getting things done in the world.

*The entry on “what would a feminist think tank look like?” may be found at <http://wiki.feministsf.net>, more specifically at [http://wiki.feministsf.net/index.php?title=Feminist\\_Think\\_Tanks\\_%28WisCon\\_30\\_Panel%29](http://wiki.feministsf.net/index.php?title=Feminist_Think_Tanks_%28WisCon_30_Panel%29)*

Rosaleen Love is an Australian writer who writes about science and the rest of life. Her short fiction has been collected in *The Travelling Tide* (2005) Aqueduct Press, Seattle, and in two books published by the Women's Press, UK: *The Total Devotion Machine* (1989) and *Evolution Annie* (1993). Her nonfiction includes *Reefscape. Reflections on the Great Barrier Reef*, Joseph Henry Press, 2001. She is a research associate at Latrobe and Monash Universities, Melbourne.

<http://users.bigpond.net.au/RosaleenLove>