WISCON CHRONICLES 3

The WisCon Chronicles

VOLUME 3

Carnival of Feminist SF

Edited by
Liz Henry

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The WisCon Chronicles, Volume 3

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Introduction

What Happens at WisCon Doesn't Stay at WisCon

Liz Henry

"What is WisCon, anyway? Some sort of sci fi thing where people dress up like Star Trek?"

"Oh, no, it's not like that. Well, it can be, but it's more like talking for days, with other people, mostly women who really like to read science fiction and know a lot of stuff. And mostly they're feminists. People who know about feminist science fiction!

"So, what's feminist science fiction? Is that like, Ursula Le Guin?"

"Well, no. Actually yes. And way more than that. People who read science fiction and fantasy, and lots of writers, and fanfic, and people who know all the women writers. But there's definitely something you could think of as feminist science fiction."

"What's it about? Killing all the men?"

"No! Also yes. Sometimes."

"So is it like a book club?"

"No. Yes. Argh. It's very bookish. But there's a lot of people who like Dr. Who and Battlestar Galactica, and know everything about Buffy, and read comic books, and not everything revolves around men and around books by men, because there's a critical mass of women who read stuff by other women. Or who notice stuff about women in regular science fiction. Not that stuff by women isn't regular science fiction. But the point is, it's very intense, and so much is happening at once that you can't get to it all, panels, discussions, academic lectures, silly parties.

> And people are really interested, and interesting, and pay attention. Then there's the blog discussions!"

I've had that conversation many times, trying to describe what makes WisCon great. These are some of the qualities I've noticed:

- Critical mass of women and feminists.
- Women paying attention to other women.
- Respect for many forms of media — books, movies, comics, tv.
- Respect for diversity of background and opinion.
- Active anti-racist, fat positive, and disability access work.
- Open, public conversations and consciousness raising.
- Setting aside time and space for an intensified conversation.

I had searched in 1995 in the early days of the web for "feminist" and "science fiction," wondering if anyone else thought like I did about those ideas together. From the Feminist Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Utopia pages, I met Laura Quilter, who brought me to WisCon 20 in 1996. It was the first I had heard of the Tiptree Award and the Khatru Symposium. My question was answered. Yes, lots of people thought about those ideas together, had read lots of science fiction and been dissatisfied with the way many of its stories treat gender and gender roles, and had gone looking for something different.

In my research into feminist and women's writing, I have found many times and places where women have come together to produce culture. Poets of Mercedes Matamoros' circle in Cuba in the late 1800s, for example, or the publishers of feminist newspapers in France in the 1830s, or the Seneca Falls convention, or the Combahee River Collective. What unites these movements is their collective nature and their visibility. They were all groups of women who had very intense conversations and then were inspired to write. Because they produced newspapers, books, or other public writing, they were visible to the public. Because they were public, we have the chance of knowing about them in a way we don't get to know about women's activism or conversations when those are kept to a private sphere.

This series of WisCon Chronicles, along with just about all of the publications of Aqueduct Press and many other zines, websites, and small press publications, and hundreds of blog posts and comments, are public writings that will give the fizz of WisCon a lasting place in women's history.

When we're visible, we're able to recognize each other. When I first went to Vito Excalibur's house and saw her bookshelves, I thought, Aha. Here's a person who has gravitated towards reading and collecting certain science fiction books for much of her life. When I see Tiptree, Charnas, Griffith, Butler, Le Guin, Haden Elgin on a bookshelf, then I know their owner shares a particular cultural background with me. That's an experience I never thought I'd have. I spent most of my life reading books — thinking about them, or thinking about their fictional characters — written by people either long dead or whom I thought I'd never meet, speak with, or write to, and who certainly would never be aware of me. For years, my most intense personal and intellectual relationships, including my experience of college, happened with people who were either imaginary, dead, or out of my reach. WisCon, and the people I have met there and continue to meet online as a result, brought me from a world of reading and writing, books and study, to a world of living conversation. The same is likely true for many fans in other areas of fandom. Blogging and the net brought conversation and interaction even more clearly into the fore, as the time and energy I once spent reading a couple of books a day and writing in a journal are now spent writing in many public forums and reading the words of living people who respond. It is a much more level playing field than the one where a reader sends fan mail to a famous author. Intellectual discourse has become *real* for me, and I think, for many other people who never experienced public discourse as accessible.

In the years since WisCon began, many people have converged to discover they were thinking on that same track. The con and zines, mailing list and blogs, and editors and writers associated with it have given feminist sf their blessing. Turning attention to particular works and expecting others to have read them has led to the formation of a "loose canon." The power of this canon came to an interesting head when people who know from feminist sf were able to understand the resonance of Karen Joy Fowler's "What I Didn't See"

(which was originally published on the Web, not on paper). Despite a huge Internet controversy about whether or not it was science fiction, it won the Nebula Award for Best Short Story in 2003.

The feminist science fiction canon has not replaced the basic sf canon. Sometimes, as in the controversy over "What I Didn't See," the two seem to be at war. At other times, we see merging or at least some cross-pollination.

About This Book

My goal for this book is to represent a cross section of the diverse conversations happening at WisCon and beyond. These conversations take place in many different registers of language, formal or informal, personal, political, performative.

This book is arranged in three sections: Intelligibility, Dialogues in Feminist Fandom, and Internet drama. I'll tell you a little bit about each section.

Intelligibility

The keys to the heart of this book for me are L. Timmel Duchamp's essay on intelligibility and the transcript of the panel on Internet drama.

L. Timmel Duchamp's Guest of Honor speech for WisCon 32, "A Matter of Tongues," is reprinted here, along with responses from Shveta Narayan, Shweta Thakrar, and Rose Lemberg. What makes a story, and what enables us as writers to tell it and be understood? "A Matter of Tongues" and its responses explain how stories require us as readers (and writers) to be aware of a variety of contexts; how one person's story may have depths accessible to some readers while excluding others, and how, knowing that, we should be cautious about judging the worth of stories. By respecting this possibility, feminist science fiction communities are creating spaces for new stories to be told and heard.

Thakrar, Narayan, and Lemberg's responses embody the power of WisCon as an entry point to an ongoing conversation. Thakrar's reaction to Duchamp's speech continued to evolve over time and cascaded into emails to her friends, who read the speech online from

Duchamp's website, talked about it, and wrote their own responses. I chose this dialogue to open the book and to model the sorts of ongoing conversations that are happening in the next section, Dialogues in Feminist Fandom.

Dialogues in Feminist Fandom

Maureen McHugh's Guest of Honor speech brought up ARGs — Alternate Reality Games — as an emerging art form in which people participate in creating a story through performing it with its authors. John Kim wrote up his summary of McHugh's talk on ARGs, along with his reaction as someone who approaches gaming as his creative art. Gremlin X and the Robot Collective from sf0 describe the game they performed at WisCon, with clues and flyers scattered around the convention and online, ending in the surreal and silly robot uprising during the Tiptree auction. And Robin Fleming from *Cerise* and The Iris Network, co-organizer of the Capes and Consoles party, wrote up a cheerful con report from the point of view of a gamer hanging out with other women who love gaming.

Other pieces highlight a playful or "ludic" approach in our writing and reading. Ted Infinity's writeup of the Worldbuilding panel describes a group effort led by Ben Rosenbaum, Doselle Young, Naomi Kritzer, and Kristine Smith. Enthusiastic audience participation created a very silly background and story called "Carnitopia" with meat-spraying volcanoes, cloudevators, and roving concrete islands in a chlorine sea. It sounds like a great exercise in listing concepts that are good to consider in order to give an sf/fantasy world physical, geographic, and social depth. Robin Fleming's amazing science fiction parody of Mary Barnard's translations of Sappho combines scholarly and technical skill with feminist and pulp science fiction sensibilities to give us a touching, sexy love poem to a being named ASofiilkadhnot'tgohwL ; erl.

We jump from silly to scholarly with Alexis Lothian's "Utopia, Fiction, and Fandom: Conflict, Community, and 'Queer Female Space.'" WisCon's academic track results in cross-fertilization between fandom and academia, another direction in which WisCon conversations move out into a different world. Lothian describes some of the ways that worldbuilding in feminist science fiction relates to the practice

of "making a world" by having panel discussions at WisCon and online. In other words, at WisCon we are engaged in the construction of a temporary utopia, a performative one that is not perfect, but is an attempt at radical or progressive perfectibility. In building sf worlds in fiction, we are outlining possibilities of real world resistance, along with many of the complexities and problems in those attempts. Lothian then leads into an outline of anti-racist feminist conversations in Stargate:Atlantis fandoms, the way pleasure and individual freedom and queering a text are sometimes given so much priority that blatant racism is ignored. But this doesn't go unchallenged in feminist fandom. Lothian points out that "intense demands are made of fannish metadiscourse: that it live up to its self-image by making something more of its source material than the source makes of itself." In this view, anti-racist fannish blogs are performing utopian worldbuilding.

Lothian's paper and its view of feminist fandom as a utopian enterprise struck me as essential reading for people aware of the last few years' discussions of racism, race, and WisCon. These conversations relate very strongly to the overarching theme of how WisCon affects what happens beyond WisCon. Lothian isn't saying that WisCon is utopia in that it is perfect; far from it. I think she's saying it's utopian in that it's a process of trying to build models of a future world that challenges our current one.

To represent some of that practice, with all its hopes and disappointments, this book includes transcripts, handouts, and summaries. It includes the "It's Not About Identity" transcript, and an extensive email conversation between Beth Plutchak and Janice Mynchenberg as white women reacting to the "Dissecting Privilege" session. Nancy Jane Moore compares elements of Laurie Marks' Elemental Logic series and Duchamp's Marq'ssan Cycle, bringing in her understanding of the history of aikido, Japanese culture, and philosophy. At the "Elves and Dwarves" panel, the discussion turned at one point to question whether it's harmful to talk about the existence of racism, and (yet again) to the idea that some people are "color blind" to race and ethnicity, a set of ideas that sparked vigorous disagreement and that, as it is posited again and again by white feminist fans, continues to piss off people of color who don't have the privilege to be unaware of racism in their everyday experience. However, this panel

also raised great ideas for future discussion, such as the tensions between Draegarians and Easterners in Steven Brust's novels, and how various people of color feel about Drizzt in R.A. Salvatore's work.

Aqueduct Press is publishing an entire book on the ideas discussed in the Narrative and Politics panel, some of which is summarized here in a short reaction by Victoria Janssen. During that panel, there was tension over panelist Susan Palwick's anecdote about Samuel Delany. Another key point was when Claire Light pointed out the political context of telling that story in the climate of reporting on the Democratic primary race between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton — a topic I believe would have become a notable Internet drama of WisCon 32 if not for the trolling described in Section III of this book.

Vandana Singh, K. Joyce Tsai, and Rachel Kronick's "Not Just Japan" panel identified many entry points to reading and thinking about speculative work from Asia, including a handout with reading list, discussion of translation and cultural gatekeeping, definitions of genre across cultures as another form of translation. Rachel Kronick's writeup describes great techniques for organizing a panel that goes into depth: talk with panelists beforehand, decide what you *don't* want your panel to be, make a handout, and list out some key points to hit in the discussion.

WisCon also makes space for "spontaneous programming." At WisCon 32, K. Joyce Tsai put together a spontaneous panel to talk about representations of gender and bodies in shoujo manga and manhwa, exploring a comics genre aimed at preteen and teenaged girls. Her panel writeup is an excellent example of the more advanced discussions of feminism and sf that take place at WisCon. Deep background in reading manga makes it possible to detect more patterns and meaning than the casual reader knows to look for. The participants in the Shoujo Bodies discussion were expert manga and manhwa readers, aware of cultural differences between Japan, China, Korea, and the US, and of many subtleties of graphic narrative.

In other writeups, Sue Lange explores critics' and readers' reactions to the idea of hard science fiction. She describes ways in which shifting definitions of what sciences count as "hard" contribute to trivialization and devaluation of women's writing. Mystickeeper summarizes the panel on YA boundaries, including magical

contraception in Tamora Pierce's novels, warning labels and rating systems, and techniques of writing scenes of violence and war that don't alienate 10- to14-year-olds. Alaya Dawn Johnson responds to that panel with many questions to the notion of what's considered to be age-appropriate in YA fantasy.

At WisCon last year, I thought of a book I've discussed with Timmi Duchamp, a book that Debbie Notkin gave me a few years ago, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby K. Payne. Payne describes patterns of narrative structures as they relate to social class. She says that linear single-voiced narratives are the structure of a middle-class story, while working class or poverty-class stories are closer to "call and response," with the story elements nonlinear and participatory. This book came to mind during the slash fic panel in a room of almost 100 people, none of them quiet. In my transcript of that panel I've tried to show how decentralized and nonlinear this discussion was, how much energy and excitement was generated in the room. It's a good example both of Payne's description of non-middle-class narrative structure — in this case applied to what was said and how it was said, even though the room was set up with expert speakers and audience, a teacher-student setup — and of the participatory culture of feminist fandom and of fic writing communities. From reports by JJ Pionke and others, the late-night, highly informal and raucous Battlestar Galactica panel was another clear example of this structure of group participation.

Internet Drama!

"Drama" is a common term on blogs, email lists, bulletin boards, multiplayer games, and other online venues. It's used to describe a controversial or intense group conversation; especially if it includes public or semi-public personal fights between friends, lovers, or people who consider themselves to be part of a common community. Internet drama inspires and horrifies. It can become a spectacle; it can be very hurtful, as strong public opinions tear friendships apart and as many people feel alienated and emotionally unsafe in the face of evidence of disrespect from community members.

The transcript of the Internet drama panel shows how WisCon is complemented by ongoing conversations on the net. Rather than being "The Place" for feminist or women's views on sf to be stated

and heard, WisCon is more clearly just a focal point, a single intense instance of that conversation that happens 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Participants at WisCon are part of a greater community of people who pay attention to what women write and think, and to women's roles in sf and fantasy. Though WisCon is not central to that online discussion, I believe it has provided a nexus around which feminists have organized and sometimes identify.

In the WisCon panel "Can Internet drama Change the World?," led by Julia Starkey, Woodrow Hill, Alexis Lothian, K. Tempest Bradford, and K. Joyce Tsai, we see that many fans consider engaging in Internet drama as cultural intervention, and in fact a crucial form of activism. As feminist fans struggle to articulate their political opinions in a public context open to public scrutiny and critique, the conversations have a chance to deepen and expand even when the context also includes a lot of controversy, defensiveness, and hostility. The panel and audience discussed the aspects of Internet drama that inspire and frustrate, and that keep us glued to our computer screens all night long. K. Joyce Tsai describes her first encounter with this form of drama in the "Cultural Appropriation Debate of Dooom" during and after WisCon 30, after which she and others began International Blog Against Racism Week. Although the Internet drama panel description didn't focus on racism and anti-racism, the discussion often turned to online discussions of race as well as gender and sexuality. The Cultural Appropriation discussion has grown several new heads this year, in an extensive Drama, "RaceFail 2009: Daughter of the Son of Bridezilla of the Electric Boogaloo," which continues online as I write this introduction.

The WisCon trolling was a complicated series of events that started at WisCon 32 and expanded into a large-scale online drama. A WisCon member identified here under one of her screen names, Zathlazip, took photos and posted public mockery of the con and its members onto forums on a notorious and snarky humor website called Something Awful. She and her fellow forum members made fun of the appearances of con members as well as panel titles and descriptions. Faces in Zathlazip's photos were obscured by crude drawings of cartoonish sad faces. Con members reacted strongly, including by posting on their blogs. At some point over the next day and a half, another site stepped into the drama: Something Awful Sycophant

Squad, or SASS, which has been described as being partly composed of people who had been banned from Something Awful for being too awful. SASS also intersects with Encyclopedia Dramatica and other communities based on humor meant to be offensive and shocking. Hundreds of comments accumulated, as a fairly small core of SASS members continued to repost and offensively modify and reframe images and details from Zathlazip's post, from the WisCon website, and from WisCon attendees' blogs and photo streams. Meanwhile, as events spiralled out of her control, Zathlazip also became a target of the SASS members. Her identity was outed in several dimensions by angry WisCon members and others; online, in her personal life, and at her job and school. In order to avoid escalation of that outing, and as a result of private discussion with Zathlazip, I have chosen not to use her name in this book. Reactions from feminist, glbt, and antiracist bloggers and communities continue to unfold, including debates on anonymity and public presence.

The WisCon Chronicles includes another example of Internet drama affecting WisCon — and vice versa; in April 2008 on LiveJournal, a man whose online handle is TheFerrett proposed "The Open Source Boobs Project." He said it would be a good idea and sexually liberating if women at sf cons would wear buttons saying "Yes, you may" or "No you may not."

> Penguicon, we had buttons to give away. There were two small buttons, one for each camp: A green button that said, "YES, you may" and a red button that said "NO, you may not." And anyone who had those buttons on, whether you knew them or not, was someone you could approach and ask: "Excuse me, but may I touch your breasts?" — TheFerrett, http://theferrett.livejournal.com/1087686.html, April 21, 2008

Over the next few days, his blog post attracted over a thousand comments. Hundreds of people reacted to the OSBP online, with long essays, personal stories, and sentence by sentence analysis of TheFerrett's post. Misia's parody outlines the Open Source Swift Kick in the Balls Project, using language hilariously similar to the original proposal. Vito Excalibur came up with a counterproposal, the Backup Project or Open Source Back Each Other Up Project, a pledge for women and their allies in sf fandom to speak up to stop sexual

harassment if they see it occurring. Like the Cultural Appropriation and Racism Debates of the last three years, Open Source Boob and Open Source Backup continue to be important in feminist and fan culture. At WisCon 32, some people wore red "BACKUP" ribbons on their name badges to indicate their readiness to back up anyone who needed support in order to escape or confront harassment.

From intelligibility in fiction to visibility on the Internet, from academic analyses of the WisCon community to wacky role-playing games, WisCon is indeed too large and diverse to encapsulate. We're passionate about fun and our imaginations, about personal and political action and its connection to cultural production and consumption. To reflect all those dimensions, I have tried to include entry points or keys to discussions and communities and their varying tones.

The long history of WisCon and direct connections between second wave feminists and current feminist discourse online give us a deep context to understand the books, comics, movies, tv, games, blogs, other media, and the culture of fandom itself that inspire our dreams of what's possible for the future. WisCon is a thousand things to a thousand people at the con, and more things to more people on the Internet. I hope this gives you a flavor of some of those things — and please remember that there are so many more.

Liz Henry is a blogger, poet, computer programmer, literary translator, and proud member of the Secret Feminist Cabal. She writes at http://liz-henry.blogspot.com, and her email is liz@bookmaniac.net.

Section I. Intelligibility

The Matter of Tongues

L. Timmel Duchamp

Being Her GoH Speech for WisCon 32, May 25, 2008

Earlier this month, when I was almost finished writing this speech, I dreamed a dream. In this dream, I was wandering about in an arcade, searching for a restroom. I really needed it, though not for the usual reason. As often happens in dreams, though I went to the place where I knew one to be, it was closed. I was desperate to find it, because I needed to get rid of the thick wad of tongues crowding my mouth. Not only because I had an appointment, but because the feel of them in my mouth was disgusting. But I couldn't find an open restroom. So finally I grabbed a handful of napkins from an espresso cart and tried as discreetly as possible to remove the tongues and slipped them into my pocket for later retrieval (since obviously I'd want them back again). I then looked around, trying to discover if anyone had seen me, when I realized I still had too many tongues in my mouth. I hated to be doing this in public; it felt indecent. But I couldn't locate the restroom, and the tongues really had to come out. So again I held a sheaf of napkins to my mouth and pulled out the excess tongues, and put them in my other pocket. And so it went, until finally I woke up.

I puzzled over the dream's meaning for a couple of days before I realized that it not only expressed my anxieties about writing and giving the speech, but also addressed its subject matter. What I'm going to talk about tonight are stories, mostly in the humble plural rather than the usual, exalted singular; stories and the politics of intelligibility. For the tongues in my dream represented types of stories. Stories are something humans enjoy an abundance of. But they're not always the stories we need, and sometimes, when they are, they're not necessarily the stories others can understand. Stories, in that sense, are similar to the tongues in the Tower of Babel. Across the breadth of their diversity, they aren't all universally intelligible.

I.

Like — I'm sure — everyone else sitting in this room, I've always loved stories. As a young girl I loved the stories in books, and I loved the stories the adults around me told. My German-American grandfather had a trove of stories about his young adult life as a migrant worker, moving from ranch to ranch and farm to farm in Midwestern Canada and the northern US, and about his boyhood and adolescence in Bear Creek and Appleton, Wisconsin.

Again and again my brother and I would ask him to tell our favorites, which I later realized we loved because they conjured up a world very different from the one we knew. His stories evoked a social setting ruled by its own particular conventions, featuring characters who were types rather than personalities. The main actors in his stories offered a recurring cast of those types, showing up in this setting or that — most notably, the Rancher or Farmer, the Rancher's or Farmer's Wife, the Frenchman, the Swede, the Englishman, the schoolteacher, the traveling salesman, the doctor. Each telling constituted a performance, full of particular words — used always at the same moment — as well as sound effects like HOL-Y MOSES! inserted for dramatic effect at the exact right moment. I'm sure the other adults present must have thought, each time we begged him to perform a favorite, Not again! But Grandpa delighted in humoring us and always took care not to omit the parts of the stories we considered essential.

While many of the stories I've loved have been stories about places and people utterly unlike me, as a child I was also eager to hear, read, or discover stories that showed me particular parts of myself, stories that explained to me who I was and might some day be, stories that offered me a way of understanding the many experiences and feelings that filled me with confusion.

The stories I encountered in print never quite fit who I was, but hungry, I lapped them up and used bits of them, the way children do, and reveled in the joys of immersion in another world than the one I lived in.

Notoriously, second wave feminists placed great emphasis on the importance of role models for young women, mostly because the 1950s removed a lot of them from common visibility. As a girl, my

role models were my grandmother, who was a strong, extraordinary woman; Mildred Heidorn, who taught me music theory and directed the high school orchestra; and Beethoven. I needed Beethoven, you see, because I aspired to be a composer, an ambition Mildred Heidorn encouraged me to pursue. But when in 1968 at age eighteen I went to university to study music, I found my aspirations under attack by the unwritten sexist rules of the composition faculty. They would not, you see, allow me the official status they were happy to grant any male student who wanted it. The examples of my grandmother, Mildred Heidorn, and Beethoven offered me no help.

Still, for about a year I thought I would manage to work a way around those unwritten rules. Each term I petitioned to study with a composer on the faculty, and I independently found musicians who were undergraduate and graduate students to perform my pieces; and although the senior faculty men did not take me seriously, many younger musicians did. It was a psychologically precarious situation, but I thought my strategy was working brilliantly when in May 1970 I was invited to have a piece performed off-campus with several other composers, who were mostly graduate students and post-docs, in three performances at an art gallery. My piece was so well-received that it was put on the department's annual program, presenting work from young faculty and a few undergraduates, held a couple of weeks later. I was ecstatic. I vividly remember walking to my lesson the day after the concert, bursting with confidence, armed with the score of my piece as my teacher had requested. Now, I thought, he will take me seriously and convince his colleagues to give me the same status as the male undergraduate composers.

But my lesson went differently than I had imagined. Doodling cartoons on the score, my teacher informed me that although my piece had been well-received by the audience, its success had been a fluke. Gently he asked me why the post-docs who'd put my piece on the program at the art gallery had done so and why the musicians, all notable new music performers, had chosen to play it.

Bravely I replied that they said they thought it was good. His smile as he shook his head looked kind, and his tone when he spoke in his light, tenor voice was mild. But his words put a knife in my heart. They all want to go to bed with you, he said. The expression on his face was avuncular: he was telling me this for my own good, to

drag me out of my state of denial. And then he sighed, clipped his pen back into his pocket, and handed me the defaced score. It's too nice a day to have a lesson, don't you think? Let's go to Treno's for a beer.

I was devastated. I needed more in a role model than Beethoven, someone to show me how to persevere and build on my success and talent despite the opposition I faced. Beethoven had never had to worry about whether people pretended to like his music just because they wanted to touch his breasts. (The desire of all the men around me to touch my breasts was something my teacher mentioned as we were having that beer.) I know that this sort of experience was commonplace, but at the time, I knew no stories like it. Of course, just ten years later, everything would have been different. But in 1970, the stories I needed weren't there for me. You see, I had no trouble believing him when he let me know that he'd agreed to teach me because he wanted to fuck me. And because there were no other women composing music on that campus, and the expression "sexual harassment" hadn't yet been invented, and there were no stories to give me another perspective, I believed that he must be right, that the musicians and other composers were only playing me. In hindsight, I can see that I was wrong. They did take me seriously. And though I didn't know it, things had already begun to change. But Beethoven's story couldn't help me see anything but that my experience was nothing like his had been. I lost faith in my own talent. I never again finished another composition.

II.

For most of my twenties, I especially sought out stories that could show me who I was and might some day be. But gradually I became more interested in the stories that offered me a way of understanding my experiences and feelings. I had always sought such stories, but these became more important as my need for role models diminished. It was around that time that, as I began to figure out aspects of my childhood experiences that puzzled me, I noticed how limited and narrow the range of available stories actually is. Very little of any of the experiences of my family were well-represented in fiction, for instance.

Eventually I realized that I had been rendered silent about most of my own history because any attempt to convey it to others inevitably resulted in their understanding it in a very partial, distorted way: my father, the uneducated anti-union factory foreman who worked the night shift, cooked all our meals, and considered physical violence an appropriate form for disciplining children; my mother, the failed housewife but brilliant bookkeeper elevated to comptroller who successively saved two businessmen from bankruptcy and made them millionaires while ending up working long past retirement age because she didn't want to retire into poverty; our strange family life as nonconformists and fundamentalist Lutherans — each discrete fragment able to fit into existing stereotypes and tropes while evoking absolutely nothing of the emotional and social experience of growing up working class in 1950s America, much less of who my parents were as human beings. Most of the stories I'd ever read about working class lives were written through the lens of middle-class narratives — leaving out all the impossible to articulate bits, the parts that made it impossible for me to talk intelligibly about my childhood.

I thought — I assumed — I would be able to find a way to make the invisible intelligible.

Well, I suppose it's necessary to be naïve about writing when you're first beginning. What I didn't understand was that the novel, as a form, is stamped with and shaped by middle class values. Violating those values tends to result in boring or implausible or polemical narratives. Occasionally a writer is able to break out of the constraints, but usually by building a context of exceptionality that allows readers to ignore what they don't get. Carol Maso's novel, *Defiance*, offers a brilliant example of that. Her protagonist, a Harvard professor of physics straight out of the working class, murders two of her privileged male students. But I have to wonder if the bits that struck me as brilliant evocations are even intelligible to a reader without a working-class background. My suspicion is that most readers focus on the sensational aspects of a woman murdering young men she has had sex with and ignore everything else.

Intelligibility. I keep using that word. It's an important concept for a writer, intelligibility. Another way to think of it is in terms of translatability. Can all concepts be translated from one language to another? Some people claim that they can, but certain ways of

looking at the world, embedded in culture, are in practice incommensurable. And concepts always partake of assumptions about the world and how it operates. Eric Cheyfitz, a scholar of Native American Studies, notes that much of the conquest of North America was accomplished by utilizing European concepts and terms that had no equivalents in Native American languages while assuming, at the same time, a conceptual universality that, when not understood by the Native Americans, was taken as proof of their not being fully human. Cheyfitz writes, We need to ask ourselves…what words or phrases in the Algonquian languages…could translate "the right of possession," "the right of property," and "actual possession," explaining the always potential disjunction between the three phrases, such that the three have to be united in one person for a fully legal "title" to exist. And so, Cheyfitz wonders, How does one translate ideas of place grounded in conceptions of communal or social labor into ideas of place grounded in the notion of identity? The problem is not…how does one translate radically different systems of property into one another. But can one translate the idea of places as property into an idea of place the terms of which the West has never granted legitimacy? Let's go back to my story about my being barred from entering a program open to any male student who wished to enter it. Although it's a story unlikely to ever happen now, partly because such discrimination is illegal and partly because gender norms have altered, it is still at least partially intelligible to almost anyone I might tell it. Not everyone would understand why official exclusion and sexual harassment blocked me from ever writing music again, but most people hearing the story will think that sex discrimination is wrong and harmful. Some people may find me culpable for having been paralyzed with helplessness and not having figured out a way to challenge the institutional structure I was up against — perhaps because they have no idea how nearly impossible that would have been for any nineteen-year-old with a working-class upbringing to do, or perhaps because they have no clue about the totalizing effects of constant, unrelenting institutionalized sexism for women living in the 1950s and 1960s. But even if their understanding of the story is only partial, they will get that there is a story there. But a story about class-, race- , or gender-based institutional exclusion, arbitrary or otherwise, would be incomprehensible to an early eighteenth-century

European, for instance. What narrative worth telling is there? Some people — all women and all but a few elite men — are naturally excluded from an academic course of study. That some fool of a young girl who ought to be laboring in the fields or toiling in the kitchen has her pretensions poked by exclusion offers no narrative tension or interest. The intelligibility of any given story is clearly situational. I would argue that often it is also political, in the sense that lack of comprehension of certain stories is an artifact of privilege of one sort or another and often serves to protect that privilege. The unintelligibility of the Alonquians' idea of place to the seventeenth-century Europeans, for instance, meant that as far as the Europeans were concerned, the land they coveted was unowned and thus there to be seized. A less obvious case, closer to home, can be seen in the reception of Karen Joy Fowler's feminist sf story, "What I Didn't See." The story is fully intelligible only to readers who have read a lot of feminist science fiction.

Those who haven't tend to assert that it's a mainstream literary story. While it's possible to read it that way, such a reading is partial and distorted and misses the actual subject-matter of the story altogether. The problem of the story's intelligibility generated an uproar of Internet discussion for more than a month after it was first posted on SciFiction.com. Over the years, several people have told me that it is not reasonable for an author to expect readers to have read such a specialized area of the genre as feminist sf. I've long argued that it will be necessary to have something called feminist sf for as long as the major works of feminist sf aren't absorbed into the genre's canon. And so I would also argue that the insistence that it ought not to be necessary to have read the most famous story James Tiptree, Jr. wrote, simply in order to understand another story — a story that happens to have been awarded a Nebula — is political. I mean, really. Would any sf fan or critic claim that it was unreasonable to expect readers to be familiar with, say, "I, Robot?" Or with "By His Bootstraps?" Or with "The Nine Billion Names of God"? The attitude that considers a precursor text like "The Women Men Don't See" obscure and outside the common sf reading vocabulary is saying, "We aren't interested in a whole set of stories that have been developed in the area of the genre dominated by women, and we shouldn't be expected to be familiar with them." In the case of the sex discrimination and

sexual harassment I experienced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the story I tell now would have been unintelligible to my composition teacher. From his perspective, I was a nubile girl who was exhibiting herself in a public space that was traditionally reserved for men, someone whose attempt to write music was the equivalent of a dog walking on its hind legs, wearing eyeglasses, and smoking a pipe. Someone who was breaking the rules. Someone who was just asking for it. Perhaps he believed what he told me, that the younger men just wanted an opportunity to hit on me; perhaps he didn't and was angry at the younger men for breaking ranks.

The point of his lesson was to make me see that the cost of my venture into a male-only public space carried a steep price. And since I did not understand that he and I were involved in a political contest, his tactic worked.

Stories are, of course, both entertainment and art. And story — in the singular, in the sense of narrative — is a key conceptual tool for historians and social scientists. But story can also be a form of political expression that has its own virtues apart from other forms of political activism and can do things that other kinds of activism can't; most of the national literature of many countries evinces a deep consciousness of this aspect of story.

I see three distinct political aspects to the issue of story and stories for feminists. First, it is tremendously important that we expand the range of stories we tell and re-tell. It is not good enough that people — especially children — who do not see themselves in the stories they read and hear and see must make do with bits and pieces of stories that don't quite fit their identities or experiences. Second, the problem of intelligibility reflects the usually imperceptible influence of privilege that allows those who are "normal" and unmarked by difference to assume that whenever they don't get a story or understand the other's anger that there's nothing there to get.

Third, the intelligibility of stories depends on community. Community — both imagined and material — provides the basis for shared stories, shared narrative conventions and tropes, shared meaning. "A community," writes poet Lyn Hejinian, "consists of any or all of those persons who have the capacity to acknowledge what others among them are doing." Take the example of Karen Joy Fowler's story, "What I Didn't See." In Karen's words, she wrote that story after "swimming

in the sea of feminist sf for thirty years." Those who have the capacity to acknowledge what Karen is doing in this story are the community who swim in that sea. This notion of community explains also why it is that at WisCon we don't need to restrict ourselves to discussing "Women in SF" or try to explain our ideas in terms of Feminism 101. Who is included in a community determines which stories can become intelligible within that community, for communities, of course, are made, not born. Feminists who read feminist science fiction often feel as though they have become part of a community, engaged in a spatially expansive, temporally extended conversation, even when they have not become part of the material feminist sf community that does exist. This is because feminist thought and practice is inherently collective, and because "getting it" — another way of talking about intelligibility — is all tied up with an alternative set of shared perceptions and ideas to that of male-dominated, mainstream culture.

III.

When I'm out in the "real world" and people ask me why I started Aqueduct, I talk about Aqueduct's serving a small audience and sometimes cop to being a "niche publisher." But I have another, more productive way of looking at this that more accurately envisions my feminist desire to contribute to the making of our world. An important part of the answer hinges on the politics of intelligibility. Many stories that feminists write — or would write if there were a market for them — are stories that are penalized in the mainstream for being unintelligible to readers who haven't gotten past Feminism 101. Such stories are often unintelligible because their assumptions about race or class or sexual or gender identity depart from those of the mainstream, so that even the editors who "get" the stories consider them not right for the venue's readership.

And some stories can also be unintelligible because they haven't been simplified and dumbed-down for the lowest-common denominator. The point of Aqueduct is to expand the range of stories being told and to extend the range of such stories' intelligibility.

For me, the summer of 2003 was a momentous turning point. As you may recall, the US was in the throes of post-911 paranoia and nationalism, and the changed atmosphere seemed to be having

a chilling effect on some of the fiction markets I had previously sold to. For years I'd been worrying that in my fiction I was, as some of my fellow writers had been telling me, setting the bar too high. The question haunted me: ought I not to make my stories less challenging, less complicated, and more conventional? And later, beginning in 2002, I began asking myself: ought I to try to make my stories more ideologically comfortable in these post-911 times? Although I had been wrestling with the problem for years, I always came back to the thought that my passion for writing flows from my intense interest in relationships and situations and characters that don't fit the usual narratives.

That summer of 2003 I attended my first writing workshop and learned a great deal about which stories are easily understood and which aren't and ended up thinking hard about what made certain stories unintelligible to some of their readers. I realized that stories based on the most common narratives, usually about white heterosexual males, were the ones that were least likely to be misread. My thoughts resonated powerfully with the questions about my writing that had been haunting me, and my sense of crisis about my own writing career intensified. About a month after the workshop, I attended Samuel R. Delany's Clarion West reading. During the Q&A, he named my stories as among his current favorites (without having any idea I was in the audience). We then met for the first time, and it was an awesome experience.

Every doubt I'd had about my work vanished. I absolutely must, he said, get my novels into print. And he lit a fire under me.

About a month after that, in an email Karen Joy Fowler mentioned having read a novel manuscript by Gwyneth Jones that Gwyneth said was "unpublishable." Karen had no idea when she praised the ms to me that I was thinking of starting Aqueduct. That ms, though, was the novel that Aqueduct published a year later under the title *Life*. It is clear to me from some of the comments I've heard about *Life* and also from many of the reviews of it that it's a story that's not intelligible to everyone. And yet, I saw on my first reading that it is a story that needs to be told and one of the stories we all need to know and understand. Add to all that my consciousness of Kelly Link and Gavin Grant's daring experiment with Small Beer Press, which made me see that I could invent my own alternative as well, and somehow

the pieces all came together to create the imperative of starting Aqueduct, which I then did.

The strength of feminist science fiction, the strength of WisCon, which has become the living, beating heart of feminist science fiction must always lie in its capacity to allow us to frame and tell and share the stories we need and desire that aren't necessarily easily heard or understood outside our community.

The continued frustration expressed by women writers over the exclusionary policies of certain publishing venues most surely has to do with intelligibility rather than the gendered statistics of submission.

Obviously we must keep insisting that our work become a recognized, intelligible part of mainstream sf. But for me, it is equally obvious that we must also continue the process of telling our own stories and learning to recognize and understand the stories of one another that we don't yet know or understand.

Community isn't simply togetherness: it's above all an active process of making the world collectively. For the grand conversation that is feminist sf, telling and learning new stories is key. The stories our community tells and understands show us who we are; the stories we tell show us who we can be.

L. Timmel Duchamp is an sf writer and critic, author of the Marq'ssan Cycle, a series of visionary political novels, and publisher of Aqueduct Press. She blogs often at Ambling along the Aqueduct http://aqueductpress.blogspot.com/. For more about her and her work, visit http://ltimml.home. mindpsring.com.