

The Aqueduct Gazette

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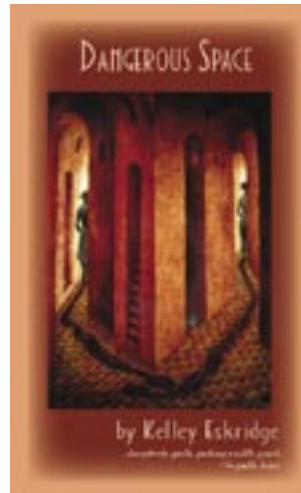
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Join Aqueduct
at WisCon 32
May 22-26, 2008
Madison, WI

celebrate with
L. Timmel Duchamp
(a guest of honor)
and many of our authors



Speculating Gender: an Interview with Kelley Eskridge

by Jesse Vernon

Throughout the many enthralling dimensions of Kelley's new collection of short stories, *Dangerous Space*, the character Mars is particularly intriguing. Three of the seven stories in this collection are told from Mars' point of view. They are tales of tangible desire, theatrical visions becoming real, tumbling bodies, and creative collaboration rife with tension and connection. After the individual publication of two of the Mars stories (the oldest dating back to 1990), a peculiar thing started happening in reviews. Some reviewers used the pronoun "he" for Mars,

while others used "she." You see, Mars, being the first-person narrator, never uses a third-person pronoun as a self-reference. And none of the other characters explicitly say, "Mars, you are a man" or "Mars, you are a woman." But very few people picked up on this fact until the publication of *Dangerous Space*, when Kelley began discussing this aspect of the stories in her publicity materials. I had the opportunity to sit down with Kelley over a pint and ask her some questions about gender as well as other experiences that had influenced her telling of these stories.

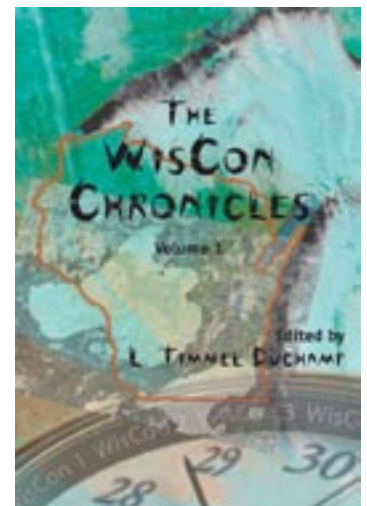
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WisCon Chronicles, Vol 1.

Edited by L. Timmel Duchamp

The word's been out for some time now that we're living in "post-feminist" times. And yet the world's largest feminist science fiction convention, held annually in Madison, Wisconsin, which many of the genre's luminaries attend, has become so popular that the ceiling limiting attendance to 1000 participants tops out months in advance. More than half those attending are women; and since the convention is openly feminist, women's issues dominate the programming. People attend to meet up with friends from other parts of the country (or the world) whom they've come to know online; they attend because the programming goes far beyond the "Feminism 101" that is the most they can hope for from most other science fiction conventions. But above all they come to experience the kind of community they can't get elsewhere.

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Speculating Gender (cont. from page 1)

— How has your own experience with gender/your gender identity influenced your writing? And conversely, how has the creative space of speculative fiction influenced your experience of gender (your own or others') in everyday life?

I see them as an endless feedback process. So my response is (a) not so much and (b) completely. What I write comes from who I am, and to me almost everything is an issue of identity. It's why all my stories start with character and build out from there.

*"This is speculative fiction—
I can do whatever I want."*

So, I'm intensely interested in notions of identity. But I don't go through the world thinking of myself as a woman, or as white, or as 47, or as... I don't know, fill in the blank. I think of myself as Kelley. I identify as a writer, and as Nicola's partner, although I don't necessarily identify myself as a lesbian.

— Uh-huh.

In fact I *don't* identify as a lesbian. I'm bisexual and that's how I identify myself when I find it necessary, which is very rarely because who cares?

— (laughing)

I believe, for writers or readers, fiction informs identity. We look for text that interests or challenges us, that we connect with in some particular way. We look for things that tell us stories about what we long to be or what we're afraid to be.

My parents were activists in the south during the Civil Rights era, including helping black activists get out of Florida when things got a little too hot. So we always had people in and out of the house—black, white, gay, straight, rich, poor, people who owned slum tenant houses, and the people that lived in them, sometimes at the same party. I knew black men who spoke seven languages and white girls with dreadlocks who were always stoned out of their minds. So my notions of identity in general were pretty flexible.

All the stories that I loved as a child were stories specifically about girls who did transgressive things—things that girls in the 1960s in Florida certainly didn't do. Girls didn't dress up as boys and take off across the English moors, or run around the neighborhood and spy on their neighbors. The whole list of things that girls didn't do was a very long one. I loved those transgressive books. The first story I ever tried to write was about girls having adventures.

So, I had early exposure to the idea that identity is fluid and that, in fact, culture doesn't determine identity. People can step outside the lines of what's acceptable or what's appropriate in their own culture. And when I started reading science-fiction and speculative

fiction in particular, that was reinforced in many, many ways. Speculative fiction is the perfect territory for anybody who wants to explore the power of difference, and it's fertile ground for any writer who enjoys metaphor the way I do. I like to say that speculative fiction is the place where we can make metaphor concrete. I don't have to be J.D. Salinger and write from the perspective of an alienated youth, I can write about *real* aliens if I want to. I can put the reader into the head of the alien or the head of the person who represents the norm, or I can even turn all those paradigms on their head.

I was at dinner recently with some friends, one of whom had read *Dangerous Space* and one of whom had not. And the person who had not read the collection couldn't understand the fact that Mars is not gendered as a character. And said to me "But...but...but...whether someone's male or female is the first thing we notice. The first thing we ask about a baby is, you know, is it a boy or a girl. And if you're going to meet someone you want to know, if you can't tell from the name, is it a man or woman. How can you possibly create a setting or a situation in which none of those cues...where people don't talk to someone as if they're a man or a woman? When it's so important! How can you do that?!" [This person was] pounding on the table and I finally got a little irritated and said, "This is speculative fiction—I can do whatever I want."

— Exactly! (laughing) That's great. It's perfect.

And then we changed the subject...

— These things go deep.

They do go deep. I understand that there are folk in the world who walk around with biology and

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Speculating Gender (cont. from page 2)

gender so closely intertwined for them that they are inseparable. I know it's true, but I don't get it. I don't have a hard time imagining a fictional character doing that, but I certainly have a hard time imagining me doing it. And I have a lot of behavior and presentation that people will regard as gendered—my hair is colored, my body is waxed, I wear make-up when I go out for nice dinners. I *do* that stuff. And I've also been through significant periods in my life where I did none of those things—I had very short hair and wore big boots and had my labrys and shocked the hell out of everybody in Atlanta with my hairy legs. But I didn't do *that* to shock them and I don't do *this* to pass. I do what I want. I do what feels good to me and what I think best expresses me. So I don't have a problem with people having a gender or expressing gender along expectation lines. I think people should do what they want and be who they are.

— You've said elsewhere that some readers view Mars as a puzzle to solve, as if somewhere, hidden within mannerisms and conversations, is an authentic gender identity. You've responded saying,

"By refusing to create a gender context for Mars, and by doing my best to remove any cues in the story that support assumptions about Mars's gender, I was trying to create a character whose experience any reader might be willing to access. It's too easy for people who subscribe to expected gender norms to then use gender as a way of denying that a certain experience is possible to them."¹

— Will you explain more of this process? Are there many subconscious cues that you find yourself including when writing a *gendered* character? Intentional cues that you add later to gender a character? Like, when you wrote Mars, did you need to later go back and take things out that might gender Mars? What was that process?

I'm hearing it as a two-part question, so let me answer the first part first.

The conversation with my friend at dinner brought home for me in a very real way how much we—the cultural 'we,' the generic 'we' as readers—want to hang labels on characters. We want to codify a character so that we understand how to respond to that person, so that we understand whether that person is being appropriate or inappropriate, if they're being a rebel or if they're going right along the party line, etc. And I get that. That's what we do. Human beings make assumptions about the world in order to get through the day. But it's too easy for people to conflate cultural expectation and human possibility.

I believe no emotional experience or human intention is denied to anyone because biologically they're female. I probably will never have a morning erection, but that's a biological experience that's hard-wired into the body, the same way that most men will never have the experience of menstruation. (I say "most" because I like to leave a little door open...) My ability to be human isn't compromised by my chromosomal make-up. I don't think anybody's is.

My process with Mars is to not get into [gender-ing] conversations. I create a context where people are accepted for their skill or talent, for fitting in to the world in which they find themselves. They're not accepted because they conform to cultural expectations of men and women, per se, but because they meet the cultural expectation of *Can you do your job?* *Can you hold your own?* *Can you be with us?* That's how I've always approached my own personal experience, so being able to do it for Mars is a joy—to find the reality in which it really doesn't make sense to spend a lot of time having gender-norming conversations.

Honestly, the hardest part of writing Mars is when there's any kind of sex involved. And mostly that's just a question of not naming body parts: of focusing on emotional responses to sex, or finding the ways of describing the physical experience that don't turn into gendered cues. So we don't talk about breasts, we don't talk about penises.

"I don't write about issues or themes. I don't write about gender. I don't write about politics. I write about people."

And it doesn't *matter* what kind of body the character is wearing. We all live in our bodies, absolutely, but the big moments in life—love, death, sex, joy, fear, loss, being given everything you've ever wanted—those moments of feeling too big for the world or feeling too small for the world—those are all *human* moments. And it *doesn't matter* whether we are a boy or a girl. Everybody feels those things.

So writing Mars is not that hard to do. I appreciate when reviewers talk about the skill or the difficulty, but for me it's really not that hard. It's just a question of balancing. In "Dangerous Space" in particular, which is the longest of the Mars stories, I made a very deliberate effort to balance anything that might lead people down a gendered path. So, for example, Mars is introduced as a sound engineer. That's a typically male profession. But at the same time that we learn this about Mars, we also see Mars being attracted to a man on the stage...a rock-and-roll singer, so everybody assumes a boy/girl dynamic and now maybe Mars is a woman. Except then we see Duncan Black [the rock star] kissing a man as well as a woman, so now who

Speculating Gender (cont. from page 3)

the hell knows what's going on? Mars is a character who ends up against a wall with a man's hand in his or her pants at one point, and has a bar fight at another. So now do you hang a male tag or a female tag on this person, based on your own experience of the world? Based on my experience of the world, I can see it going either way. That's really how it is for me.

And it's not a game. It's not a game. There is no right answer except that Mars is human. And hopefully anybody who is adventurous can slip into Mars' skin for the duration of the story and just feel what it's like to go there.

— So, going back to the idea of confluents: many people tend to conflate sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation—i.e., a biological male will necessarily identify as a man and will necessarily be 'masculine' and therefore attracted to women. Your characters tend to challenge these assumptions across various lines of identity. Can you talk more about encountering these assumptions (in readers and perhaps yourself) and what it's like to play with those boundaries?

Boy, it's a big question.

Some of us like to live out on the edge, but most of us, I think, like to operate from our zones of comfort, and categorization of other humans is a very comfortable thing to do because then we know how we're supposed to behave with them.

I found pretty early on in my own life that I got tired of people making assumptions. I got tired of people assuming that because I didn't have a boyfriend, I was a lesbian. I got tired of my lesbian friends assuming that because I didn't have a girlfriend, I was straight. I spent a lot of time alone before I met Nicola, so I got very tired of people assuming that I must feel lonely. Sometimes I was, and sometimes I really wasn't. I found out that making assumptions about what people will or won't do with their feelings or their bodies is pretty much a fool's game. It really is. Because we never know. If we're open at all to the world, we just don't know what we'll do. It's nice to have rules and feel safe and to have a sandbox within which we play, but I've learned that most of those limitations are self-imposed. If one were going to characterize my life, one way to characterize it would be that I have crossed categories in so many ways. I've jumped [economic] class. I've been identified as straight, as lesbian, as bisexual. I like to drink beer in pubs and very expensive wine. I travel

"Making assumptions about what people will or won't do with their feelings or their bodies is pretty much a fool's game."

well between various cultural groups—I'm good at picking up cues, and at participating as fully as I can within different cultures. And because that's been my personal experience, I tend to write about people who do that. Because I think it's fun.

So what's it like to blur those boundaries? It's fun. It's exciting. It's freeing. It feels naughty sometimes. It feels transgressive. And I like being transgressive. And I don't do it for its own sake, but if I can be myself and raise someone's eyebrow, that's fine with me. I enjoy confounding people's expectations. And I hope I'm enough of a grown-up that I won't just do it for its own sake, but I also hope I'm enough of a grown-up to say, "Yes, this is who I am right now. This is what it is." And to no longer feel compelled to apologize. And so I'm having enormous fun with my fiction—to cross boundaries, to push back on assumptions.

— It sounds like everything that you do is really grounded in experience—personal experience and, more generally, human experience.

Personal experience is the wellspring of identity. I grew up relatively poor. I grew up as an only child. I grew up in a house where all different kinds of people were welcome based on who they were as *people*, how they behaved, what they did, what they brought with them, and it wasn't about anything else. I learned pretty early on about the effects of racism because the little girl whose grandmother lived across the street suddenly wasn't allowed to play with me anymore because there were black people in my house. It wasn't the same kind of experience for me as it was for the black people, but it was my doorway into the experience. And it was the beginning of the opening up of my imagination as to, "Well, okay, so what must it be like for these people?"

But I really do have a horror of the co-mingling of art and politics. A lot of people do it and they do it very successfully, but it's not part of my process at all. I think that conscious theme is the death of good fiction and good music and good art. But that's just me. Mileage varies hugely in this regard.

My work is for me. The things that I want to explore and express are about freedom. I want to take a reader, metaphorically, by the shirt, pull them up close and say, "Imagine... imagine a world where it wasn't about who was normal and who wasn't, it was about the spectrum of experience—here's one experience of love, here's a different one, and here's something else..." If we can find doorways into all those different experiences because they are all human experiences, maybe at the end of the day we can sit down

Some Thoughts on Women and War

by Carolyn Ives Gilman © 2008 Carolyn Ives Gilman

Recently I have found myself in an odd situation for a person descended from a long line of Quaker pacifists: I have been earning my living studying military history. I hope you will not stop reading when I say that I find it fascinating.

It is not that I have become a militarist. In fact, it seems to me rather urgent that we should not leave the study of conflict to militarists. Those of us who would like to prevent wars need to study them, because we notice new things. For example, the usual interpretation of war breaks down along gender lines: the traditional roles of men (combat, strategy, logistics and command, etc.) are defined as war. The traditional roles of women (food production, child bearing and rearing, home and family maintenance) are not war. Women are, almost by definition, civilians.

This is a peculiar state of affairs. War, it seems obvious to me, is a dysfunction of whole societies. It wouldn't happen if half the population weren't acquiescing (at the least) or participating (at the most). And yet, women participate in different ways than men do. They fight, as it were, on different battlefields—so different that the noise and confusion of male combat makes them invisible.



Let me give an example from the war I am currently studying: the 40-year-long resistance of the Indian tribes of the Ohio Valley to the invasion of Euro-Americans, which lasted approximately from 1754 to 1794. In the 18th century, women were not expected to play an active part in war, but in this case they did, on both sides. There are many stories about women in what can only be called combat—tough Kentucky women who seized their husbands' shotguns to repel intruders, or lit fires under Indian attackers trying to shimmy down the chimney. At one dramatic moment during the siege of Boonesborough, the women of the fort sallied out to fetch water, so bravely defying death that the Shawnee commander, Blackfish, gallantly allowed them to complete their errand unharmed.

But such moments were the exception. The vast majority of the time women fought in subtler ways. I am particularly interested in the Indian women who

were attempting to keep life going in the midst of the carnage. They helped defend their homeland in a way so unlike Euro-American war strategies that it bears study. They fought by adopting the enemy.

Adoption was an old and integral part of Indian warfare. Prisoners captured in a raid would be terrorized, brutalized, and forced on a long, disorienting journey. Their clothes were taken away and they were dressed in new ones. Once severed from their old identities and stripped of mental defenses, they were given over to women who exercised a ritual right to decide their fate. Women who had suffered a recent death in the family could demand a revenge killing in compensation. But they might also choose one of the prisoners to adopt in place of their deceased relative.

The adopted captive experienced a sudden change in status. He or she was now treated with great kindness—literally, as a member of the family. After a little while their freedom was not restricted. They could walk away at any time. And yet, remarkably few did. Whether it was Stockholm Syndrome or a genuine preference for their new life in the close-knit Indian community, Euro-Americans settled in happily and often declined to be “rescued” when conquering armies demanded their release.

The phenomenon of adoption was widely written about in colonial America, and it struck terror into Euro-Americans. The popular explanation was that there was something so alluring, so addicting, about Indian life that once people had been converted to it, they were lost forever. Journalists warned western settlers always to be on their guard—to avoid eating the meat of wild animals, or living by hunting, since these might cause degeneration to set in. As for going to live with the Indians, they didn't call it “captivity,” they called it “captivation.”

So adoption was an extremely effective war strategy for the Indians. It terrorized the enemy by challenging their assumption of superiority and making them doubt their own identity. It converted enemy combatants into new recruits, often extremely useful ones. It replenished a population thinned by war. It was also a way for Indian families to cope with grief.

Another strategy Indian women had for co-opting the enemy was marriage. Euro-Americans who spent time in the Indian community came under intense pressure to marry. Often a man yielded as a mere temporary expedient, then later found himself so

Women and War (cont. from page 5)

emotionally committed to the mother of his children that he could not break free. His loyalties were altered. As with adoptees, he was often regarded with suspicion and contempt by Euro-Americans—“squaw man,” they called him.

Thus Indian women deployed love as a war strategy. These women actively converted enemies into husbands and sons, tampering with their loyalties. It was slow and incremental, but it eventually worked on the French and the Spanish, and it would have worked on the Americans, as well—if it hadn't been for a counter-weapon American women deployed: sheer fertility. American women were having families of thirteen or sixteen children, overwhelming the Indians with sheer numbers. The American war against the Indians was not won on the battlefield; in twenty years of fighting only Anthony Wayne managed to win a battle. The war was won by demographics. That is, by women making babies.

As a matter of fact, if you think on a time scale of centuries, I am not so certain the Americans have won. Who do you think those immigrants are, flooding across our southern border, changing the composition of our culture? They are the descendants of Indian women who married Spanish men. We invaded the Indians, and now they are returning the compliment. There is something marvelously just about it.

I worked some of these ideas about war into my last science fiction story, called “Okanoggan Falls,” recently reprinted by Aqueduct Press. It is a story about how women make war. In it, the aliens have already conquered, and are now occupying, Earth. The aliens are, of course, metaphorical. Like human occupiers, they are susceptible to assimilation; but in this case they are vulnerable to physical, as well as cultural and psychological, metamorphosis. In the story a human woman unsuspectingly thwarts an alien's defenses, and transforms him. In the end, the humans do not win in any conventional sense; but one alien has become human, and the implication is that, over the years, the rest will follow. In the end, the women will win.

Although the story was selected for two Best of the Year anthologies and has been translated in three countries of the former Soviet Union, American reviewers generally seemed a little baffled by it. The most thoughtful review, by David Truesdale, found the story dissatisfying because of the ambiguity over whether the humans had triumphed. There was no revolt, not even a conspiracy.

“So what was really gained, and what lost? Earthlings are still conquered on a global level. Okanoggan Falls

and its surrounding towns will still be leveled.... So it looks like the only good to come of this is that Susan Abernathy *feels* good about what she had achieved.”

(www.sfsite.com/fsf/2007/dt0704.htm)

I disagreed with him not so much about the story, as about what constitutes victory.

Conventionally, victory has been defined as forcing your enemy to retreat, surrender, or die. Victory is when you overpower and force your will on your opponent. I would like to propose an expanded definition that includes what Indian women were doing. Victory is also when you get your enemy to love you.

That may be setting the bar a little high. It is also victory when you persuade your enemy to tolerate you, since that is the first step to incorporating with you. It is victory when you and your enemy blend so that the boundaries become unclear, even if you give up some of what you are in the process.

Now, this is not a short-run type of victory; it is not an immediate-gratification victory, which Americans are so fond of. It is incremental, slow, and lasting. It stands the test of time, because it has deep roots.

I have to think: how much differently might we be fighting wars if this was our definition of victory?

WisCon Chronicles (cont. from page 1)

Some participants even characterize it as “four days of feminist utopia”—a reference to the communities created in the most famous feminist novels of the 1970s.

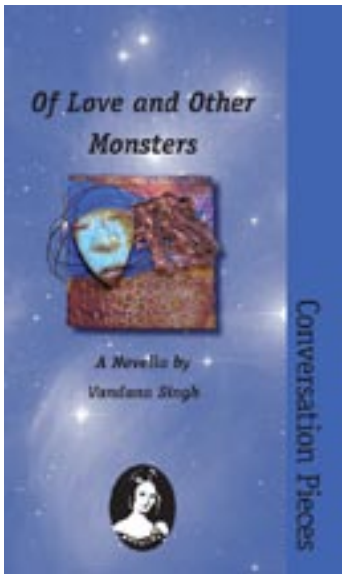
L. Timmel Duchamp has assembled a collage of diverse materials to document the thirtieth anniversary of WisCon, which was a grand reunion of most of the convention's previous Guests of Honor. These include the transcript of Samuel R. Delany's interview of Joanna Russ, several essays reflecting on the diverse aspects of the convention, as well as papers presented in the academic track, panel notes and transcripts, an original short story by Rosaleen Love, and Eileen Gunn's snappy Q&A series with numerous WisCon attendees, among them Ursula K. Le Guin, Julie Phillips, Ted Chiang, Carol Emshwiller, and Suzy McKee Charnas.

Praise for *The WisCon Chronicles: Volume 1*

“In addition to capturing the proceedings, [Duchamp] also was interested in exploring hot-button issues that emerged from the discussions. Homing in on those areas of discomfort fits with the convention's reputation as an event that goes beyond Feminism 101.”

—*The Capital Times*, June 21, 2007

Recently Released Conversation Pieces



Of Love and Other Monsters

A Novella by Vandana Singh

Seventeen-year-old Arun emerges from a fire, his memories and identity vanished with the flames. He finds a refuge and home with Janani, and soon he discovers his unique ability to sense and manipulate the minds of others around him. Intimately connected yet isolated by this insight, he inhabits a dangerous place outside conventional boundaries: man/woman, mind/body. When someone who shares his ability, Rahul Moghe, arrives on his doorstep, he senses a power beyond any he has known. Janani warns of the grave danger posed by Rahul and sends Arun on his journey, fleeing the one person who may have answers to the mystery of his past...

The Mundane and the Magical: an Interview with Vandana Singh

by Jesse Vernon

The newly released *Of Love and Other Monsters*, by Vandana Singh, explores the boundaries that shape our world—distinctions that we often take for granted: between man and woman, body and mind, human and other. Through a series of emails, I asked Vandana about the ideas and influences that shape this story.



➤ How has your own experience with gender/your gender identity influenced your writing?

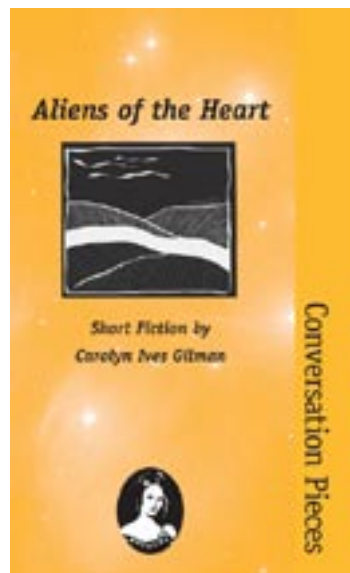
I have to start by admitting that I might be the least qualified person to comment on my own writing. I can tell you about my life experience of gender issues but I can't tell you why or how I wrote a particular story except at the most mundane level. One reason is that I often don't know what I am trying to say in a story until months or years later, or unless someone asks me and forces me to think about it.

Having made that disclaimer I can tell you that as far as life experience goes, I've been involved in various ways in gender issues, not least of which is being female. Unfortunately I've discovered that in the West some people expect me to write about downtrodden females because of course I must be one, or must have escaped from India because I was one in the past, Because of course all women in India suffer so much and bear their sufferings meekly. The truth about being female in India (and probably elsewhere, too) is a lot more complex than the simplistic assumptions of people here. I grew up in a middle class family with hordes of strong female relatives (where "strong" does not necessarily mean "strident" but might include it). My brother and

Aliens of the Heart

Short Fiction by
Carolyn Ives Gilman

Aliens of the Heart collects four stories of the heartland by Carolyn Ives Gilman. In these stories, Betty Lindstrom imagines leaving her husband in the town of Lost Road and turning east instead of west out of town and never coming back, but when she does drive west with her husband, alone with the prairie and the wind, she can't get home; Susan Abernathy undertakes to humanize Captain Groton, the alien charged with removing the residents of Okanoggan Falls, WI, with consequences she could not have imagined; Galena Pittman seeks to recover her lover, Thea, from the mountains of Montana, where she devotes herself to literally painting the landscape under the direction of the mysterious Dirigo; and the Conservator, charged with preserving the many layers of the map of the great river "on whose surface the past was written in cipher," discovers that the relationship between map and landscape is more complicated than she had thought. "The Conservator" is original to the volume. "Frost Painting" and "Okanoggan Falls" appeared in Gardner Dozois's Year's Best Science Fiction anthology series.



The Mundane and the Magical (cont. from page 7)

sister learned to cook; I didn't. We had female cousins who were denied treats by their grandmother in favor of their brother, but my sister and I were never treated that way. At the same time it was obvious that women, including all the tough ones, did the housework even when they worked outside the home. I learned early that Hindu goddesses were people you didn't want to mess with, but somehow men got most of the perks.

I got interesting conflicting messages: women were weak, so had to be protected, women were powerful, they had to be contained or else they might destroy the universe. When trekking through the Himalayas as a teenager I came across indigenous women's movements initiated by illiterate village women who had never heard of Betty Friedan. I marched in Delhi streets against the murderous abuse of the custom of dowry, shouting slogans that translate as "we are women of India, we are fire, not flowers." Later, when I found myself living in the US, I volunteered in a couple of Asian women's support groups for victims of domestic violence.

I suppose what fascinates and puzzles me about gender is that only a small fraction of it seems to be rooted in biology; the rest is a social construct, which is why gender roles can differ across cultures. The rigidity of gender can be very limiting if you want to be a complete human being.

— And conversely, how has the creative space of speculative fiction influenced your experience of gender (your own or others') in everyday life?

The wonderful thing about speculative fiction (of the best kind) is that it allows you to play in so many ways. For me one inspiring eye-opener was Ursula K. Le Guin's classic *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which showed me one way to be creative about gender. Since then I've read other spec fic works that play with the notion in interesting ways. I think imagination is the key to freedom: you have to dream a dream before you can realize it. In my own writing I've noticed (upon looking back) that I talk a lot about boundaries that people—particularly women—have to negotiate in order to find out who they are or to become complete in some way. Sometimes those boundaries lie between human and animal, sometimes between childhood and adulthood, or the mundane and the magical.

— When your main character, Arun, perceives the mind-signatures of strangers, he cannot determine if they are male or female. Later he observes:

My ability to sense minds enabled me to see human beings as entities beyond man-woman categories. I decided, after some months of informal study, that rather than two sexes there were at least thirty-four. Perhaps

"sex" or "gender" isn't right—perhaps a geographical term would be more appropriate—thirty-four climactic zones of the human mind!

— Can you talk more about this perception and how it affects the rest of your story?

Some years ago, when I shared an early draft of this story with some American writers (on various occasions), there was a very vocal reaction from some of the men and also from a couple of women. They complained that Arun didn't come across as male. One woman even said to me that since Arun didn't watch sports or drink beer, she couldn't think about him as a man at all. I was rather flabbergasted by all this. Later I thought about it very hard and those thoughts led to the next draft, including the extract above. I realized that there are some rather rigid notions of how gender is expressed in America, at least in urban middle-class America. In India, despite the rigidity of gender roles (which again can be different depending on family, religion, class, and region) there is a lot more fluidity in terms of how gender is expressed. I mean, I've met men like Arun, for heaven's sake! (All this is apart from the fact that Arun isn't exactly typical in any way).

To give a small example, men in India often walk around with their arms around each other. It is just fine to express physical affection if you are the same gender as another person. It also does not mean you are gay, although if you are, it is very convenient. There's no gender police out there saying if you do that you are not a man. Although, if a man walks around in a sari everybody would laugh at him unless he is a hijra (the traditional sub-culture of gelded men) or a male shopkeeper in a sari shop modeling a sari for a customer. Also if you watch Bollywood movies you'd see that the traditional hero is in some ways aggressively male, fights like a man, but cries unashamedly "like a woman" if his friend dies, and wiggles his hips like a seductress during the dance sequences. There is a lot of androgyny in Indian culture—look at our Hindu gods, especially my favorite, Shiva! He's cool!

So I guess what Arun is trying to say is that at heart the difference between one individual's mind and another's may be greater than (or at least as important as) the difference of gender. Gender is just one dimension of a person's being; there are so many more. I think (but can't be sure, since he hasn't told me in so many words) that Arun finds gender differences fascinating because they seem so artificial to him; yet they provide a sort of analogy for him to understand the boundary he's negotiating: that between human and alien. And that's all he's telling me about it now.

The Mundane and the Magical (cont. from page 8)

Many people tend to conflate sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation—i.e., a biological male who identifies as a man will necessarily be ‘masculine’ and therefore attracted to women. Your character Arun challenges these assumptions across various lines of identity and relationships. Can you talk more about encountering these assumptions (in readers and perhaps yourself) and what it’s like to play with boundaries?

I think my childhood and young adulthood in India has a lot to do with how I perceive boundaries. In my first published story, “The Room on the Roof” (*Polyphony*, Volume 1, from Wheatland Press), the protagonist is a thirteen year-old girl in New Delhi, who, in the beginning of the story, has just realized that she lives within the intersection of many worlds. I used a mathematical analogy to explain that—Venn diagrams—and it is exactly how I felt growing up. Whether the boundaries were between animal and human, male and female, body and mind, I felt I was in some kind of space where these categories overlapped. Not everybody growing up in India has this experience so it was also me: I was the kind of shy kid who got along better with animals than with people. My friends included the local pariah dogs that throng Indian towns and cities along with the occasional human. My experience of gender was also interesting because I saw strong women at the helm of things in my family—matriarchs in all senses of the word—but mostly acting within roles defined by the patriarchy. At the same time education was a big deal in my family and women were as likely to have advanced degrees as men. So the complexity of it was really interesting.

I don’t really know how readers react to what is in my stories apart from the few people to whom I have shown my work, or the few who have written reviews. I have a sense that what I write isn’t really of interest to “mainstream” science fiction and fantasy in the U.S. although I hope I’m wrong about that!

You also write children’s literature. In an interview with author Samit Basu, you comment that you “read happily and indiscriminately across boundaries” of age categories in fiction. Do you notice a difference in the way you portray gender in your children’s characters compared to your novels for adults?

I should make clear first that when I set out to write a story I have no message or intent in mind. Most of the time I have a character in my head, sometimes with an image, and a feel for when the story has brewed enough in my mind and is ready to be written.

Often I vaguely know the ending or the beginning but not much else. The first sentence leads to the next one and so on, and there are all kinds of surprises along the way. So for me writing is an act of discovery as well as a deliberate act, which is what makes it so interesting and addictive.

So I don’t deliberately set out to write something about gender, for instance. There are stories of mine in which it plays a limited role. But if I’m asked to look back I might be able to see a pattern in my work (or not), which is what I’m attempting to do now.

“At heart the difference between one individual’s mind and another’s may be greater than... the difference of gender.”

My Younguncle books for children do comment on gender, although in a subtle way. Younguncle, the main character, is a maverick problem solver who follows his heart and his whims and cares nothing for the frowns and disapproval of the world. He has no problem helping a Great-Aunt shop for saris, or dressing up as a bride to play a trick on an unpleasant man. He is likely to tap dance on the street if the impulse takes him, or burst into song, or cook the most incredible food for his nieces and nephew. When chased by villains he runs away, screaming “help,” while at the same time having some aces up his sleeve. And he’s no less a man, for all that.

These books also feature resourceful women, including one who is a super-manager and talks in capital letters, and another who uses tears and melodrama to cleverly get what she wants. Yet another young woman is a brilliant mathematician who considers marriage neither necessary nor sufficient, and figures out a solution (with Younguncle’s help).

Many of my short stories for children (published mostly in India) feature girls who discover important things about themselves: one in the context of a trip to Mars, and another in a situation set in a totalitarian future Delhi where she has a chance to change the course of events. So I guess gender issues do permeate a lot of my writing, although I may not always be aware of it until I look back.

How have different cultural contexts in this novella—rural India, the metropolis of New Delhi, small towns and large cities in the U.S.—influenced the identities of your characters?

Well, geography, including its cultural aspects, does affect character—hence the stereotype of country mouse and town mouse. Growing up, I experienced life in a big city, in small towns and also visited the ancestral village. Since I was mostly brought up in the bustling metropolis of New Delhi, the contrast between it and the small town and village scenario was striking to say the least.

Hanging Out Along the Aqueduct...

by Jesse Vernon © 2008 Jesse Vernon

Exploring the architectural masterpiece that is Seattle's downtown library, I emerge from a stark white hallway full of mysteriously locked doors into the blazing red insides of this great beast. Curving corners and ceilings give this level an intestinal feel. Suddenly, I'm a kid again, sneaking through secret tunnels, and I dash down the stairs to peruse the fiction section for my next journey.

Scanning these stacks I remember the pleasure of knowing shelves of books like the back of my hand. Working at a bookstore was heaven and hell—so close to so many stories, yet cracking a book was only allowed as a pretext for selling it. I spent almost two years shuffling books for one of the corporate chains. Surrounded by the shining worlds of authors like China Miéville and the inane drivel of Anne Coulter (often obliged to sell more of the latter), I still reveled in the opportunity to spend all day discussing books. This hyper-capitalist context was my first encounter with books treated as pure product. Sometimes I found this intriguing: the size, shape, color, even texture of a book were significant factors in whether or not it would sell. Though these accoutrements are peripherally important to the story or ideas contained within, I began to see books in more complex light.

Yet many booksellers and even our general manager never really *read* books. And sometimes being someone who did could be a detriment. Why waste time talking to a coworker or customer about your latest favorite when you could be organizing the displays into corporate-designed pyramids or replacing stale books (those that haven't sold in a week or two) with fresh new ones? Although bookseller recommendations, particularly of titles from smaller presses, do play an important role, it felt like the majority of people followed a predictable pattern in their book purchasing: Was the author on Oprah? Has it recently been made into a movie? Has it stirred up controversy? Has the publisher paid our bookstore to place their book front and center on the table? In corporate bookstores, these questions hold much more sway than, say, what would the bookseller recommend? Luckily, my move to Seattle introduced me to the rich, if not lucrative, world of local bookstores with staff that will spend time sharing their latest find.

The stories spun in books hold a special place in my life. Sometimes they can be healing journeys that will shed new light on my life and experiences. Sometimes they are innocent escapes where I can dwell in the heads of others, instead of my own, for a while. And some-

times they take over, sucking me away from friends and family, seeping into my dreams. Books are my security blanket—when there's not a person occupying it, a pile of books takes up the empty space in my bed. They have the power to lull me to sleep and captivate my consciousness. Some tales so strongly demand my attention that my daily routines shift to accommodate the story that must be told: holding the book in my left hand while I brush my teeth with my right, trying not to splash soup on the pages as I eat dinner, tilting my body at odd angles to catch the beams from streetlamps as I walk home in the dark, nose in a book. I bemoan the tasks that cannot incorporate my book: bathing, chopping vegetables, riding my bike.

As the pages trickle from my right hand to left and I near the anticipated yet dreaded end, my next book is often waiting in the wings. This time, however, I'm in limbo between books, hoping something will pop out at me from these library shelves. My eyes fall on Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* tales and I remember my childhood obsession with anything that came in a series. The unambiguous order made the selection of the following book so simple. Hence, *The Boxcar Children*, Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*—I always knew what came next. The perpetual decision of what to read next is more complicated these days, with the dearth of series for adults and the abundance of tempting solitary novels. Though, like a series, my subsequent choice often depends on what came before. After reading too many fluffy texts, for example, I'll need a hearty dose of something along the lines of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* or *House of Leaves*. When I'm distracted by life and prefer less of a commitment, short stories are in order. Unlike the predictable sequence of my childhood choices, there is not much consistency or logic to these decisions. Sometimes I will jump right in and read a book that someone hands me, regardless of what's on my proverbial "to read" list. Other times I will approach all books with trepidation, knowing that once I crack the spine, it could be a while before I reenter the real world.

What about you—how do you decide what to read next? Do you have an actual "to read" list and do you stick to it? Do you read multiple books at once? Mix fiction and non-fiction? Do you seek recommendations from librarians and booksellers? We'd love to hear your answers—join the conversation by emailing us at conversation@aqueductpress.com, and we'll post your replies on Aqueduct's blog.

Speculating Gender (cont. from page 4)

and think, “Holy shit, those people are so different from me and, you know what? I get them. I am not them, but I get them.” Or even, “I don’t get it but at least I see what is. I don’t get it but, wow, isn’t that an interesting way to be human?” Even if there’s just that amount of connection... and so I’m not about polarizing. I’m not about the lens of harsh reality. I think there’s enough harsh reality in the world. I’d rather just look at human experiences: how are they congruent, how do they flow together, how can I relate to that?

There is a place in our world, a *need* in our world for people who make the argument on a global scale, who fight for the cause, who proselytize, who take the issue out to the people, and god bless those people. Actually, I don’t believe in god so I shouldn’t say that. Bless those people. But I’m not one of them. My way is through relationship and personal experience, through making connections with people and asking them to re-imagine the things that they do.

Have I answered your question?

— Oh, yes.

The Mundane and the Magical (cont. from page 9)

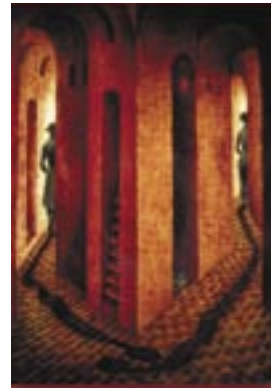
One of the most obvious things that is affected by cultural geography is one’s sense of time. I remember summers in the town where my grandparents lived, and where we also lived for two years. Time ran thick and slow as honey. Then there is space too. In the smaller places there was more of it to wander in. Time to explore ditches after monsoon rain, look for tadpoles, watch out for cobras, time to wander through the neighborhood at four in the morning and find our way to the fields where a lone farmer drove his oxen. A largesse of time and space make it possible to participate in and experience life in a completely different way, to mull over things, to wonder idly. This, I think, is important to have at least in one’s youth. It shapes who you are.

In the story, Arun had that. I think his special ability might have helped him to retain that need to participate in the world, to be a taster of its mindscapes, its joys and sorrows, like a curious kid in a magic shop. It kept him from ambition, from becoming obsessed with getting to the top of the ladder like other young men. In a way it kept him from so-called growing up. Sankaran was like that too, in a different way from Arun, though. That’s my astute observation of the day. I leave the rest of the analysis to interested readers.

“For me writing is an act of discovery as well as a deliberate act, which is what makes it so interesting and addictive.”

The complete interview can be found on our blog at aqueductpress.blogspot.com. For more information about Kelley Eskridge, check out her website at www.kelleyeskridge.com. To purchase *Dangerous Space*, go to www.aqueductpress.com/orders.html.

¹ Kelley Eskridge, “Identity and Desire,” *Women of Other Worlds: Excursions Through Science Fiction and Feminism*, ed. Helen Merrick and Tess Williams (Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1999), <http://www.kelleyeskridge.com/essays/identity-and-desire>.



For more information about Vandana Singh, visit her website at <http://users.rcn.com/singhvan/>. To purchase *Of Love and Other Monsters*, go to www.aqueductpress.com/orders.html



Praise for *Of Love and Other Monsters*

“Singh writes with a beautiful clarity. Each character is sharply drawn, and the inevitability of the story pulls the reader headlong with it—helped by a compelling sparseness of prose. Nothing unneeded is written, leaving *Of Love and Other Monsters* with an incredible tightness that is rarely seen even in the best of today’s modern short fiction.

Of Love and Other Monsters is an engrossing, though somewhat melancholy, story. The reader is quickly carried away by Arun’s story and journey, and Arun is a character who subtly challenges our perceptions of what it means to love and be loved. Singh also uses him to show us how we often harm ourselves with our own limits.

I certainly recommend this to any reader. It is the best short fiction, and possibly the best fiction, I have read this year.”

—Michael Fay, December 17, 2007

<http://thefix-online.com/reviews/of-love-and-other-monsters/>

Forthcoming, 2008

The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 2

Edited by

L. Timmel Duchamp and Eileen Gunn

Documents WisCon 31 as well as continues several of the discussions begun there.

Centuries Ago and Very Fast

by Rebecca Ore

When I first met him running on the moors, I thought he was gypsy or part Paki with his otter body and the broad head that ended in an almost pointed chin, but he said he was European, old stock, some French in the bloodlines. His left little finger ended just below where the nail would have been...

A gay immortal born in the Paleolithic who jumps time at will, Vel has hunted mammoths, played with reindeer tripping on hallucinogenic mushrooms, negotiated with each successive wave of invaders to keep his family and its land intact, lived as the minor god of a spring, witnessed the hanging of “mollies” in seventeenth-century London as well as the Stonewall riots in twentieth-century New York City. He’s had more lovers than he can remember and is sometimes tempted to flirt with death. *Centuries Ago and Very Fast* offers fascinating, often erotic glimpses of the life of a man who has just about seen it all.

England, that has such beautiful men in it, wasn't even an island when Vel was born, and Vel was born in drowned country between here and there...

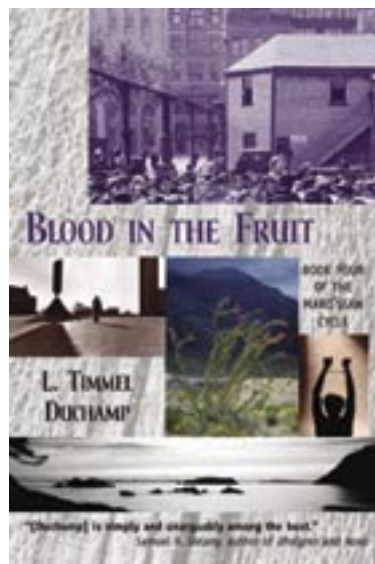
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2096. The Free Zone is stable and thriving, while in the US, the career-line women who have taken over the Executive attempt to enact a reformist, liberal agenda. Can their liberal policies hold the line as a new wave of activism sweeps the US, and the barriers between the Free Zone and the US begin to crumble?



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