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The Aqueduct Gazette

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Aqueduct Press Releases a New Collection by Gwyneth Jones

Imagination/Space: Essays and Talks on Fiction, Feminism, Technology, and Politics

Last year the Science Fiction Research Association honored Gwyneth Jones with their Pilgrim Award for Lifetime Achievement, for her consistently excellent critical writings about science fiction. Gwyneth's criticism has long been respected in feminist-sf circles; her previous collection of criticism, *Deconstructing the Starships,* was both eagerly anticipated and well-received. I recall snatching it off a table in the Dealers Room at WisCon—and later in the weekend finding myself in the position of being begged for a few hours with it by another con-goer because it had sold out.

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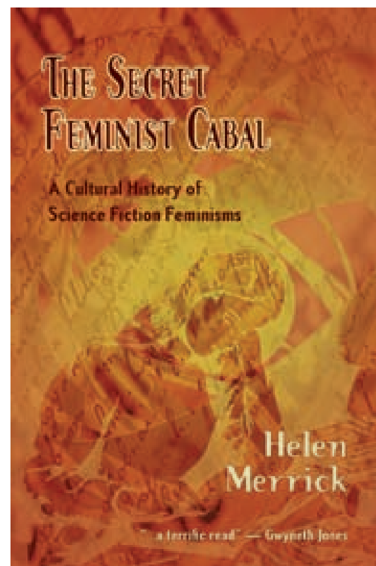
The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms

by Helen Merrick



Aqueduct brings sf book-lovers a special treat for their winter reading. Written in elegant, lucid prose, *The Secret Feminist Cabal* will surely engage anyone interested in its subject matter, the inner workings of the world of feminist sf, sometimes referred to as "the secret feminist cabal."

Veronica Hollinger, co-editor of *Edging into the Future, Blood Read: the Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*, and *Queer Universes* writes: "*The Secret Feminist Cabal* is an extended answer to the question Helen Merrick asks in her introduction: 'why do I read feminist sf?' In this wide-ranging cultural

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Feminist Cabal (cont. from p. 1)

history we are introduced to a multiplicity of sf feminisms as Merrick takes readers on a tour of the early days of sf fandom, tracks the upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s and the explosions of feminist sf in the 1970s, and contextualizes subsequent developments in feminist sf scholarship. Her history is expansive and inclusive: it ranges from North America to the UK to Australia; it tells us about readers, fans, and academics as well as about writers, editors, and publishers; and it examines the often uneasy intersections of feminist theory and popular culture. Merrick brings things up to date with considerations of feminist cyberfiction and feminist science and technology studies, and she concludes with an intriguing review of the Tiptree Award as it illuminates current debates in the feminist sf community. Broadly informed, theoretically astute, and often revisionary, *The Secret Feminist Cabal* is an indispensable social and cultural history of the girls who have been plugged into science fiction."

Here's Gwyneth Jones on *The Secret Feminist Cabal*: "I really enjoyed this. It's a wonderfully thorough, analytical, and inclusive account, sure to become an indispensable resource. Better than that, it's a terrific read. Here you'll find everything you always wanted to know about women in fandom, women in publishing, women as writers…with the added value that the snippets of tasty vintage gossip are woven into a rich fabric of discourse. Helen Merrick's style is unassuming yet authoritative; she manages to be a scholar and an entertainer at the same time. Years ago, I read *Women of Other Worlds*, edited by Helen Merrick and Tess Williams, and was impressed. *The Secret Feminist Cabal* is more demanding, an ambitious project, but equally successful: this is a fine book."

And Katie King, author of *Theory in Its Feminist Travels: Conversations in U.S. Women's Movements* characterizes *The Secret Feminist Cabal* as "a story-laden feminism, one that weaves together not only the historical contexts for women's presences in sf and the varieties of feminisms women did and did not espouse, but tells us HOW all this happened. Merrick's work allows us to learn how to practice this kind of story-telling ourselves, demonstrating how many knowledge worlds co-created feminist sf."

A taste of *The Secret Feminist Cabal…*
excerpts from the Preface

…I was your classic "square" kid: a bit of a geek who took maths and science subjects, always did my homework, liked *Omni* magazine, read all the sf and fantasy I could find, and argued about the existence of aliens with my friends (when we weren't trying to convince people they were just a construct of our imagination). Despite the signs, I didn't follow the science route, but with a short detour through music found myself eventually studying history at university. Up until this time I had still been avidly consuming the classics of sf, which came to an abrupt halt as I discovered feminist theory and, with growing horror, turned its lens on the Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein I was reading. Henceforth I officially foreswore sf (despite occasionally indulging in guilty binges in semester breaks).

And then, in 1992 I was rescued from my self-enforced abstinence. I was taking a class on the history of technology in which we read Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" ([1985] 2004a). Here was a feminist theorist after my own heart. I must confess that on first reading, most of the theoretical revelations passed me by; I was too enthralled by the magic phrase Haraway conjured before me—the authors she called on to be her storytellers for cyborgs were writers of feminist science fiction. What wondrous beast was this? Was it possible that my politics and reading

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Imagination/Space (cont. from p. 1)

The pieces in *Imagination/Space* range from talks given at cons (including the fascinating "String of Pearls," which muses on the relationship between sex and horror as it focuses on Jacquelyn Carey's Kushiel Trilogy and what happens when a woman is the Chosen One of a fantasy epic), re-evaluations of classic feminist sf novels, a look at the entry of women writers into the traditionally male subgenre of militarist sf, a consideration of "girl power" on television, to her report on the W.I.S.E.R. conference in Maastricht and her acceptance speech for the Pilgrim Award. This is edgy, witty writing on subjects that will appeal to most Aqueduct readers.

—Timmi Duchamp

The Shady Relationship between Lesbian and Speculative Fiction by Carrie Devall

Recent internet conflicts over diversity in science fiction and fantasy have made me reflect on my odd path into the genre, which makes me less interested in genre boundaries than in connections between specific sets of stories or novels across genres. Those conflicts made me question, yet again, why so few out lesbian authors regularly produce stories centered on overtly lesbian characters in science fiction and fantasy, despite the number of queer women writing in the genre. As a developing sf/f writer, I find myself subtly or unconsciously pulled in the direction of playing down lesbian elements or issues in my own writing, and not as a simple matter of responding to overt homophobia or fear of being marginalized. My natural inclination is to look to the works and biographies of lesbian writers of the past and present to tease out some of the possible reasons why this occurs, as well as why lesbian have chosen sf/f as their genre or used speculative elements in their fiction.

"Ideas of 'strong' and 'active' female characters are freighted with assumptions about gender and sexuality and dominated by images and archetypes created by men that require much work to undo, disrupt, or subvert."

I randomly read a bit of science fiction as a teen and loved scifi movies, natural history, and model rockets, but my literary obsessions were Russian and nineteenth-century American classics, sailing and whaling stories, and books by any queer or black authors that I could find. I didn't really discover sf/f until an article in the Winter 1989 issue of *Out/Look* magazine provoked me to start scouring shelves for queer science fiction. Unable to locate more than a few of the listed novels, I turned to feminist sf and to cyberpunk after reading Joanna Russ and Melissa Scott. Later I took an sf writing class, mostly because I'd heard the teacher was a lesbian, which sparked in me a deeper interest in sf/f and led me to my first con—WisCon 30—a speculative writing group, and Clarion West 2007.

Cons always make me aware that the genre I am truly fannish about is queer fiction, with lesbian fiction the ultimate prize. On some level, I will always be that queer teen in the 1980s, feeling starved for representation yet unreasonably picky about the way in which it is done. And the availability of decent stories by, for, or at least about lesbians is not yet so abundant that the starved feeling has become completely ridiculous. So while I can thrill over a really cool sf/f story about straight folks, thoroughly enjoying the geeky good bits or the beautiful writing, at the same time it also makes me yearn to see that kind of beauty in a wider variety of queerer stories.

The more I appreciate and assimilate sf story elements and recurring content, the more I feel split between two genres, each with different expectations from their core readers, sometimes clearly compatible but often not. As a reader I cross genres easily and read a wide variety of books for different purposes (i.e., some for hard science, some for characters in both lesbian relationships and communities). As a writer, I have found it harder to negotiate the split. Sf/f tends to favor a conflict-filled, well-paced story with an active, rather exceptional individual as protagonist. Adapting this to include a lesbian focus entails acknowledging, ignoring, or defying the complicated politics and history of lesbian representation.

Both individualism and the conflict-based model of narrative have been critiqued by lesbian feminists. Ideas of "strong" and "active" female characters are freighted with assumptions about gender and sexuality and dominated by images and archetypes created by men that require much work to undo, disrupt, or subvert. This work is complicated because different lesbian communities do not necessarily share a language for discussing these issues, and outsiders to the lesbian world are unlikely to be aware of the issues with any real depth or nuance.

Additionally, the characteristics of strong female characters that I find questionable are usually coded as cool and sexy in ways that have powerful resonance in current mainstream media culture. This fact has been used to great advantage by lesbian sf/f writers to create characters with cross-over appeal. However, these characters are often portrayed as the lone wolf above or not needing to play by the rules of lesbian communities, casting lesbian communities in a negative,

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Shady Relationship (cont. from p. 3)

stifling role that lesbian readers may be able to receive in a non-lesbophobic fashion but non-lesbian readers may simply fold into their unquestioned negative stereotypes. Lesbian fiction has suffered from both authors' and readers' desires to see perfectly positive representations as a counter to the history of negative images and ideas about us. Thus, many portrayals of strong lesbian heroines seem to have been subtly distorted by the author's reactive stance toward that pressure to be positive. Heterosexual approval or replication of these distortions is, thus, problematic.

I haven't seen the negative side effects of over-reliance on this practice across the genre examined in any real depth. In general, critical discussions about lesbian fiction and representation in speculative fiction have not been developed to the extent that would be necessary for lesbian writers to be able to easily draw on those discussions using shorthand or buzzwords that a broad section of readers could rely on. Questions of representation are often very emotionally fraught in lesbian communities, and critical discussions often quickly over-personalized. Various takes on feminist theory have been used as weapons in nasty arguments over lesbian social and sexual practices, such as the "Sex Wars" of the 1980s. We have no central, agreed-upon locations to have complicated discussions in respectful, constructive ways as a broader community, and information about past discussions is mostly available from fragmented or anecdotal sources, when preserved. These factors continue to contribute to lesbian invisibility in fiction production and criticism.

While sf/f that is either lesbian-authored or has lesbian characters remains relatively marginal in the sf/f world, and while some folks in queer literary circles may still scoff at sf/f, I don't think you can say that speculative fiction is marginal to lesbian fiction. Mysteries and detective fiction and romance crowd the Lesbian shelf at the local feminist bookstore, but the same publishers release sf/f-themed titles with regularity, and several popular lesbian erotica writers also write sf/f. At a recent con panel, a member of the audience asked whether fanfiction is a training ground for new sf/f writers, and panelists and other audience members stated that it was not. However, several well-published lesbian fiction authors started in or moonlighted writing lesbian-themed Xena fanfiction. And one of the few current magazines devoted to fiction about lesbians, *Khimairal Ink*, openly welcomes speculative fiction and includes many authors who once wrote Xena fanfiction.

The reasons for this connection are varied and complicated. One is that many lesbians like to read about strong, active female characters who have adventures and impact the world in significant ways. But getting a fix from fiction that is biographical and tied strongly to historical realism is limited by the ways in which sexism, homophobia, racism, and class, and legal restraints on women's ownership of property and on the activities of single women and lesbians of various kinds affected individual lives in the past and continue to operate in the present. Fantasy stories and futuristic stories allow women, and thus lesbians, a freedom of movement that strictly realist stories do not.

"Fantasy stories and futuristic stories allow women, and thus lesbians, a freedom of movement that strictly realist stories do not."

The historic association of lesbianism with vampires, ghosts and in particular poltergeists, and other monsters linked to sexual repression (with lesbianism depicted as psychologically abnormal) is another direct reason why speculative elements might fascinate (and trouble) lesbians. Such associations are familiar and need no overt explication, which allows authors to easily draw on and subvert them. Moreover, since in significant portions of popular culture sexual repression itself is now viewed as a negative, a skilled author can use the power of that association to critique the sexually repressive aspects of homophobia and historic lesbian invisibility (and of racism) simultaneously. In *The Gilda Stories*, for instance, Jewelle Gomez creates her own version of lesbian vampires and spins a web of complicated metaphors about the search for identity and authenticity, bonds between women across generations, the different and contested meanings of family, and violence and parasitism between white women and black women.

Disguises, secrecy, shams, and cons are similarly useful metaphors for lesbian identity and resistance, which proliferate in a variety of lesbian novels, often centered around "passing women" and the crossing or subversion of gender boundaries. In Judith Katz's

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Shady Relationship (cont. from p. 4)

Running Fiercely toward a High Thin Sound and *The Escape Artist*, stylistic quirks, Jewish mysticism and, in the latter, a mysterious gender-bending magician give the historical narratives a fantastical quality.

British lesbian author Sarah Waters' latest novel *Little Stranger* uses a possible haunting to explore the role of various forms of sexual repression in the changing social structure of Britain after World War II. She highlights the instability of heterosexuality as an identity and institution and performs other queer work in the ostensibly "non-gay" novel. Less obviously speculative, Waters' novel *Affinity* uses spiritualists and the possibility of malevolent spirits to explore how we, through a lesbian protagonist, construct our interpretations of reality to suit our desires.

Scottish lesbian author Ali Smith uses speculative elements and mythological allusions in some of her stories and novels for similar deconstructive purposes. Portions of Smith's novel *Hotel Worl*d are related in the first person by a girl who died in a random accident shortly after discovering her own lesbian attraction to a girl she's just met. These sections manage to subtly humanize her beyond the stereotypical "lesbian who dies." She laments her own inability to maintain control of the story and remain at its center; her fading away presents a literalized demonstration of the destructive effects of lesbian invisibility (which entails not simply silencing but also punishment) on narratives, making the reader feel, in both her death and the abrupt end of her burgeoning narrative of romance and discovery, the loss of a potential that will never be realized. A question of blame and self-denial lingers in the background of the story of her accident, in a way that also seems appropriate.

Reading the history of sf pulps and fanzines recently, I started thinking about why writers like Joanna Russ and Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree Jr. did not begin to appear in the genre until the 1960s. I wondered about the connection of the larger pulp market, heavy with crime and confession stories as well as science fiction, to the lesbian pulp novels that were mass marketed to a curious heterosexual audience (though some were written by and meant for lesbians, predating the upsurge of out by-for-and-of lesbian fiction in the wake of Gay Liberation and Second Wave feminism). I then began to notice that the lesbian writers outside the genre whose careers paralleled the pulp era often used speculative elements or tropes in their work as metaphors that are frequently interpreted as critiques or resistance to normative ideas about gender and sexuality of their time period.

> "… these writers developed individual strategies for how to be true to themselves as writers in the face of lesbian invisibility and government and societal censorship…"

Each of these writers developed individual strategies for how to be true to themselves as writers in the face of lesbian invisibility and government and societal censorship, including the threat of jail or worse for writing directly about homosexuality. The speculative elements of their work seem to have been directly related to their resistance, as ways to code or decenter their critiques, their appeals to queer readers, or the queer content of their stories, or as ways to express their gender dysphoria or resistance to and alienation from gender and sexual norms.

One such writer is Patricia Highsmith, born in 1921 and thus a rough contemporary of Alice Sheldon. She wrote comic books for eight years to support herself while writing short stories. Most of her fiction is classified as suspense or crime fiction, but the stories center around psychological mysteries or horror, and the evil present in some stories is not clearly human.

Highsmith's skillful use of the highly fantastical point of view of murderers or criminals and other literary techniques to portray mainstream "reality" as pathological and disturbing is not so different from the use of alien or fantasy world-building to perform that same task. It is also extremely queer, as her alienated, often fey protagonists struggle against the rules of society or commit crimes because the rules don't apply to them.

Although depictions of homicidal impulses in many of her novels carry male homosexual undertones or subtext, under the pseudonym Claire Morgan ,Highsmith also wrote *The Price of Salt*, which is hailed as the first lesbian novel with a happy ending. Highsmith based *The Price of Salt* on a brief encounter she had with an older woman while working as a store clerk, whom Highsmith fantasized about intensely and spied

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on. Unlike most of her novels, *The Price of Salt* does not have a speculative feel to it. Late in her career, Highsmith wrote *Small g*, a relatively positive novel about an openly gay man, which also has a solidly realistic point of view. It's interesting that she moved into realism to overtly and approvingly depict gay characters.

Another writer from the same period is Mary Renault, a British-born writer who emigrated to South Africa and is best known for her historical novels about homosexual male relationships in ancient Greece. Tolkein's Oxford lectures on Icelandic folklore and his approach to the original texts (before the publishing of his novels) affected her deeply, and early on, she wrote fantasy poetry and attempted to write novels with medieval settings and versions of the courtly romances. Before and during WWII she wrote contemporary novels about women who were involved in lesbian as well as heterosexual relationships or romantically involved with men who had Platonic relationships with male former lovers. Her lesbian stories were never as well received as she hoped, though she evaded censors. Her first major success came with *The Charioteer*, an exploration of Platonic ideals through a male character and his homosexual loves and relationships. After she moved to South Africa, she turned to ancient Greek, Cretan, and Macedonian characters in an attempt to draw on what she saw as historical parallels to criticize and propose alternative solutions to South Africa's developing apartheid system. While she focused intently on historical accuracy, she also chose characters such as the Persian eunuch slave Bagoas, who existed in the holes of the historical record, Theseus, and the amazon Hippolyta, whose stories rely as much on myth as known historical fact.

I haven't read the fiction of turn-of-the-twentieth-century writers Renée Vivien or Natalie Barney, only some poetry. However, Karla Jay's biographical study *The Amazon and the Page* (Indiana University Press, 1988) states that they wrote fantasy stories, stories based on fairytales, ancient myths, and the courtly romances, and explicitly drew on this material as part of a strategy to develop a lesbian-centric vision of the world and fiction. I am also not as familiar with the work of Virginia Woolf, but from lesbian-focused critical biographies and analyses of her fiction, it appears that she used what would likely now be considered speculative as well as post-modern strategies to code and complicate her lesbian content and criticism of gender and sexual norms and restrictions.

I'll conclude this list of lesbian writers who draw on the fantastic with Carson McCullers. Sarah Gleeson White's critical analysis *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers* (University of Alabama Press, 2003) notes that McCullers' use of "the Southern grotesque" differs from that of other Southern authors, such as Flannery O'Connor, and argues that McCullers' work was subversive and critical of gender and sexual norms (as well as the racial status quo) and more identified with and compassionate toward her "grotesque" and adolescent male-identified female characters. White claims that McCullers enacted Bahktin's concept of the grotesque as "at once both affirming and revolutionary" and that she reclaims the pleasures of marginality and alienation from the normative community. White also discusses McCullers' use of the fantastic and tropes of flight, literal and metaphorical, in ways that seem to point directly towards young adult adventure stories and fantasy fiction.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of lesbian writers of the twentieth century or of those with arguable links to speculative fiction. I offer the brief discussions of their work because I find it interesting how many of the major out lesbian writers that pre-date or parallel the early years of science fiction's development as a genre used speculative elements to discuss gender and sexuality, covertly or overtly. Though I have only gestured toward a useful explanation of how and why this might be true, I believe this usage is relevant to discussions of lesbian authors and content in the genre and the resources new lesbian or queer sf/f writers can draw on in their own work.

"…many of the major out lesbian writers that pre-date or parallel the early years of science fiction's development as a genre used speculative elements to discuss gender and sexuality, covertly or overtly…"

Love at the City of Books

by Kristin King

It had been seven years since I visited Portland. Having young children has mostly kept me close to home, but now that they are six and four I feel more confident that our family can cope with the separation, so I went with a friend and stayed two nights.

"What are you going to do?" people asked me.

"Powells," I said.

"What else?"

"Powells."

I had a plan, based on past visits and an understanding of my limited time. I came prepared with a series of interlocking quests, or inquiries, which could be answered only by going from one section to another. I would spend all day Saturday there, tasting books and going for walks when I needed a break. And I would spend $100 or less on books.

I am proud to say that I limited myself to $75. I bought *Ishi: Last of His Tribe*, a children's archaeology book, two children's pirate books, the picture book *Shibumi and the Kitemaker*, *Locus* magazine, a history of children's strikes in the U.S., a book by bell hooks, and a book by Gloria Anzaldua.

But I tasted many more books, and I ended up with a surprise theme: love and radical politics.

We'll be reading Gwyneth Jones' *Life* for our book group, and I do better with a little appetizer that helps me gain trust in an author. So I opened her book of short stories *Seven Tales and a Fable* and was immediately drawn to the title "The Princess, the Thief, and the Cartesian Circle." It combines a classic and enjoyable princess story with the modern epidemic of young women cutting themselves and with various threads of philosophy from Descartes to Jung. Although the narrative was complex and difficult, Jones quite considerately brought everything to one understandable question. (Thank you, Gwyneth, for being thoughtful of your reader.) Here it is:

"Does love exist? I do not know. But I know that if it were to exist it could have no limits. It could not have a beginning, or an end. There could not be a place where love was not, or a time when love had not been."

When later I visited the bell hooks book *All About Love*, I found the same question:

"My grief was a heavy, despairing sadness caused by parting from a companion of many years but, more important, it was a despair rooted in the fear that love did not exist."

From there, hooks redefines love:
"...to truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication."

Using her redefinition, she asserts that love cannot be present in an abusive relationship. I disagree, but at the same time, I recognize that words are tricky beasts and sometimes cannot be given a workable meaning. And her redefinition allows her to present a coherent framework that examines partner abuse, child abuse, domination in general, militarism, capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, class struggle, the nuclear family, equality, spirituality, and the need for community.

I am always interested in ways to share radical politics with a general audience, and I was impressed to see that the book was on the bestseller list in 2000. So as I read, I noted some of her techniques. She started off by addressing the reader's need for love, the lack of and longing for love, using self-help books written by a bunch of white guys. Then, gradually, she worked in social justice concepts from women and people of color. Nicely done.

I made sure to stay at Powells one hour after I got tired, to be sure I had my fill. But I'll be back, and this time I won't wait seven years. My family can manage. Really.

Coming in March

Narrative Power: Encounters, Celebrations, Struggles,

Edited by L. Timmel Duchamp

Introduction: Going to Narrative

BY EILEEN GUNN

> Chuck Todd: I mean, is she really the most qualified woman they could have turned to?
>
> Peggy Noonan: The most qualified? No! I would think they went for this—excuse me—political bullshit about narratives—
>
> Chuck Todd: Yeah, they went to narrative.
>
> *Discussion of Sarah Palin's vice-presidential qualifications, broadcast accidentally on MSNBC, September 2, 2008*

Narrative power: who has it, and what are they going to do with it? How does the ability to tell stories and the need to hear them affect who has political power and who has none? Was the US election in 2008 won by the candidate with the most compelling narrative, as many news analysts suggested? Or will future historians tell a different story entirely, from the same set of events?

In the study of history, control of the narrative confers power. It is commonly said that history is written by the victors: the narrator chooses the events that will be part of the story, and the narrative explains their meaning. A narrative names the winners and the losers, establishes who is part of the story and who is not, and burnishes the reputations of some while consigning others to the dustbin.

The right narrative in politics can win an election, gather a mob, destroy an enemy, start a war.

A number of social animals—humans, some other primates, and many social species of mammals and birds—have a characteristic, sometimes called narrative intelligence: the ability to formulate a narrative—to tell a story, verbally or non-verbally. This characteristic, clearly older than the human brain, is associated with the ability of humans to maintain social groups and to manage cooperation and competition among group members, and it is theorized to be one of the key cognitive/behavioral characteristics that has enabled humans to develop complex, highly individualized societies.

Politics and social activity have a lot to do with one another, and I wonder if narrative and politics can really be separated. Just as narrative can be seen as a tool for human socialization, so politics can be seen as a set of strategies for using that tool: negotiating the hierarchy and power structure thus created. There are many anecdotal accounts of interaction among individual monkeys and apes that take social hierarchy and relative physical strength into account and seem—at least in their narration—to be examples of primate politics.

Cognitive scientist Kerstin Dautenhahn, on whose paper "The Origins of Narrative" I have drawn for much of my information here, quotes a researcher's description of an incident in which a young female chimpanzee, Hennie, after being slapped by the alpha male, negotiates an apology, is given a kiss on the hand, and then seeks and receives comfort from the oldest female. Professor Dautenhahn says, "This example shows that the agent (Hennie) is interacting with an eye to future relationships, considering past and very recent experiences" (2004, 142). I may be imposing my own narrative on this, but I think that, in addition to apparently constructing a story from a series of events, Hennie shows impressive political skills.

Narrative Power: Encounters, Celebrations, Struggles, the book you hold in your hand, also includes narratives of females negotiating interactions with powerful males, but in none of them do the females appear to have either asked for or received a paternal kiss on the hand. The first section, "Narrative and History," lays out the tension between the research and interpretation of historical narratives.

Carolyn Ives Gilman, who is both a writer of fiction and a historian specializing in narratives of the American West, delivers a *tour de force* of narrative form and an excellent introduction to the conflicts presented by the very act of studying history. She begins with a cogent description of the importance of narrative to human beings, then tells the historiographic tale of competing ways of looking at American history: the European linear narrative approach is laid against Native American circular narratives, and trouble ensues.

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Narrative Power (cont. from p. 8)

Just as her essay seems to become a special pleading for a particular point of view, she points out how easy it is for narratives to show one POV to advantage. Ultimately, Gilman suggests, historians have to take strong stances in order to do their work. Her essay consistently makes its case in narrative form, even while pointing out that narratives allow the storyteller to slip some questionable assumptions by the listener and taking the position that doing so is indeed one of the uses of narrative.

L. Timmel Duchamp, who was trained as a Renaissance historian and is now a novelist and short-story writer, writes from a more disillusioned point of view, narrating her own experience as a doctoral candidate caught up in the dramatic personal narrative of a medieval Florentine woman. Duchamp recounts the beginnings of women's history and microhistorical studies in the early 1980s and suggests that these more personal, narrative approaches have the as-yet-unrealized potential of changing how historians look at history. Ellen E. Kittell, a medieval historian, expands, like Duchamp, on the study of personal narratives of private individuals as a way of understanding history and suggests that the current academic focus on how history is studied overshadows the actual study of women's history, especially in under-researched areas, such as the lives of medieval women.

Rebecca Wanzo moves the discussion from history to sociology, analyzing decades of narratives in the news media about missing and murdered children, narratives in which affluent white girl-children have been sentimentalized while poor black children have been devalued and ignored. Wanzo observes that the prevailing narrative, putatively about protecting children from harm, obscures the fact that the majority of children killed in the US are murdered by people they know, not abducted by strangers, and that child mortality rates would be significantly lowered by providing health insurance and reducing poverty.

There is a reason for the existence of clichés: the easiest stories to tell and to listen to are the ones that everyone knows already, the ones that reinforce the listeners' beliefs. The less sophisticated the listeners are—the younger the children—the less likely they are to tolerate change or ambiguity. A bedtime story about Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail, and Richard will drive a three-year-old slightly bananas if she knows anything at all about *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

Adults, as a rule, also like to hear the same stories, although they prefer that the stories have some differences—the human brain loves to detect differences. The popularity of familiar stories that reinforce the status quo is not limited to television and popular literature: historians repeat themselves.

Horatio-Alger stories thus become the narrative for male public figures who rise to success from poverty; for women, the story is more problematic, because female public figures are anomalous. In either case, the politics of the narrator inform the story being told. In narratives about women, as Joanna Russ has pointed out in her classic *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, the narrator may simply deny that the woman actually accomplished anything worth noting.

The second section of *Narrative Power*, "Narrative and Politics," deals with the political effects inherent in choice of narrative—whether it is applied to a person or to a class of people—and the uses to which a chosen narrative may be put. Lesley A. Hall details the relative absence of women scientists (and mad women scientists) from both historical and fictional narratives. Wendy Walker tells the story of Constance Kent, a girl whose confession of murder, whether true or false, resulted in a *cause célèbre* trial in Victorian England; Walker, obsessed with and infuriated by a particular Victorian book about the case, created an experimental text in which the book critiques its own narrative.

Lance Olsen argues in favor of difficult narratives as being particularly good for the mind and suspects that simple narratives are responsible for a mental decline in the population. Alan DeNiro and Susan Palwick each examine the narratives in works of speculative fiction by, respectively, A. E. van Vogt and Gordon Dickson, and tease out their political implications. Rebecca Wanzo, in her second essay in this volume, delineates an exploration of the nature of sentimentality and empathy in the *Parable* texts of Octavia Butler, who is surely one of science fiction's least sentimental but most empathetic authors.

Andrea Hairston enters into the narrative of the film *Pan's Labyrinth* and participates in it on its own terms. Some viewers are confused and disturbed by the question of what is real and what is not in the

cont. on p. 10

Narrative Power (cont. from p. 9)

world of the film: what does it *mean*? Hairston says it simply doesn't matter. "Story is how we seek to order the universe," she says, "how we make chaos beautiful, meaningful; how we define who we are, were, and will be. [...] Stories shape our minds, our institutions, our possibilities. Stories map the future. We believe the stories we have internalized despite our immediate experiences to the contrary. Story persuades us to see what's in the story as truth and deny the truth of our own experiences" (138).

That says it all, doesn't it? It addresses the problem that the film presents, of a helpless child in a ghastly reality. Stories confer deniability on chaos, and sometimes that is the only option available.

The third section, "Narrative and Writing Fiction," offers essays that are less descriptive and more prescriptive. The essays here do not assume that all narratives have equal meaning: they tackle the qualitative issues of what narratives mean vs. what writers may want their narratives to mean.

The incomparable Samuel R. Delany contributes a wide-ranging meditation on the creation of fictional narratives, encompassing the value of truth, the deceptive comfort of cliché, and the relation of art to life. Nicola Griffith argues that there are healthy and unhealthy stories, and that creating the story is a way for the writer to imagine her own emotional development; she suggests that a woman writer should envision a future of positive change and "write the story into herself," rather than out of her experience. This is very much from the point of view of a writer inventing her territory, and she supports her worldview with her personal narrative.

Eleanor Arnason sums up the activist message of this section: "If we are artists, we need to examine what we are doing and whether we are actually saying what we want to say, or instead allowing old plots and motifs—the ideas of all the dead generations weighing like a nightmare on the brains of the living—to impose their agendas on our art" (217). Like Arnason and Griffith, Rachel Swirsky takes a close look at progressive social messages and explores how they have been integrated into narrative.

Claire Light provides the culminating essay of the book, a narrative account of her complex personal history and literary aspirations, set against a discontinuous cultural backdrop of post-colonialism, multiculturalism, and the 2008 US election: she tries to re-invent narrative and embed her new self in it, as James Joyce sought to awaken from the nightmare of history.

Humanity has, over the millennia, found new uses for narrative: entertainment, education, and enlightenment. But ultimately, narrative continues to serve its original purpose: to provide coherence and structure in our relations with one another, to help us make sense of our social environment.

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Looking Forward: Coming in 2010

The Universe of Things

Short fiction by Gwyneth Jones

The stories in *The Universe of Things* span Jones's career, from "The Eastern Succession," first published in 1988, to the just-published "Collision." Each opens a window into a richly depicted culture in which its intelligent, resourceful characters struggle to make sense of the mysteries of their world.

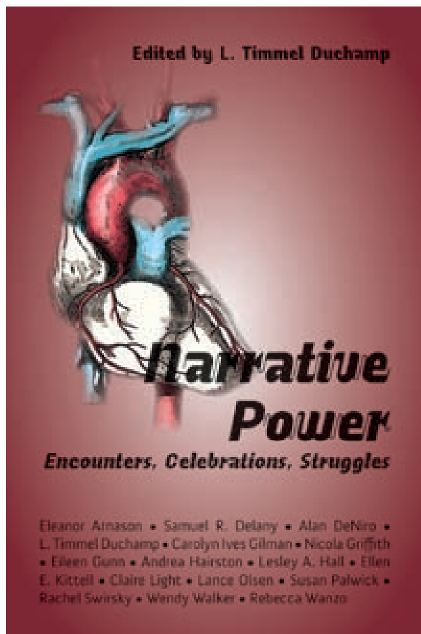
Tomb of the Fathers

A short novel by Eleanor Arnason

In this witty romp of a planetary romance, Lydia Duluth joins a motley crew of intergalactic travelers to explore the long lost homeworld of the Atch, who have a mysterious history they'd like to keep buried on the planet they left behind. But the expedition goes alarmingly awry when a rogue AI, determined to keep the planet and its system quarantined, destroys the stargate, and the expedition is stranded on the planet. The travelers soon encounter the native Atch and discover the Tomb of the Fathers—and what can happen when childcare becomes the dominant issue for a species.

WisCon Chronicles, Vol 4.

Edited by Sylvia Kelso



I wake up as a giant robot

Giant robot, womanthing, hipcurve:
I've dreamed to be inside you!

Pincerclaw!
Desirable sexoskeleton!

I can pick up
cars and throw them
to flame and scrap!

I'm a beetle hot
chitin elyctra silicon
armored hardon!

I'm tits padded soft
to the underwire bones of me
and the sentences
that drive my wild code
firelogic flash
memory-chipped heart!

Oh neurowire cyberfinger twitchsoul room of my own!
Transformer! Superalien machine! Buckles that knit
brain to timewalk jetpack knuckles - kaPOW!

Oh fuck! I can do anything
in this wild body!

— Liz Henry

Feminist Cabal Preface (cont. from p. 2)

pleasures could be reconciled? Eagerly I set about tracking down and reading every author and story hidden in Haraway's footnotes and, as they say, the rest is history. Within a few years I had started a PhD on feminist sf, and more than fifteen years on from that "aha" moment, feminist sf is still my passion, my fiction of choice, the core around which most of my critical activities circulate.

[. . .]

As I read more, including the critical work on feminist sf, the issue of why so many feminists were antagonistic towards, or ignorant of sf became ever more pressing. Why was this innovative and challenging body of feminist work so rarely acknowledged as a "legitimate" subject for feminist study? I was not the only feminist sf reader to ask such questions. . . .

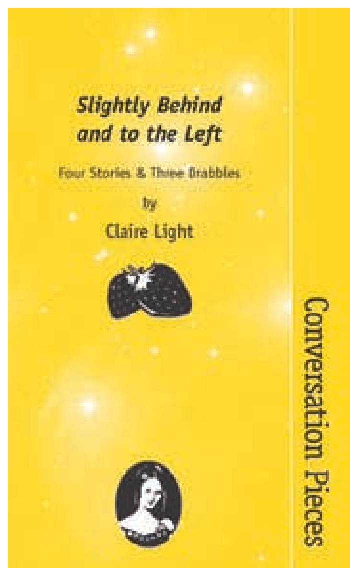
It is this quest(ion) which initiated my desire to consider in the broadest sense, all of the commentaries on feminist sf I could find. My search led me beyond the normal confines of sf criticism, to audiences and readers outside academe. I discovered fandom, fanzines, and conventions. I. . .managed to attend the feminist sf convention, WisCon in Madison, Wisconsin. WisCon 20 was a pivotal moment for me. Not only did it introduce me to the global feminist sf fan and writerly community, but it also gave me a sense of the history of feminist fandom including access to copies of some of their increasingly rare fanzines.

. . .My immersion in the sf texts and fandom together have led to a concern with the sf "field" as it is broadly constituted, and thus I focus on fan writings as much as academic texts in telling this story. . . .

If nothing else, this book might provide an answer to why I have found feminist sf so engaging. Hopefully it does much more, and reveals what all kinds of feminist readers might find illuminating, challenging, and inspiring about the production of sf feminisms.

New Conversation Pieces

Conversation Pieces, Vol. 26



Slightly Behind and to the Left: Four Stories and Three Drabbles by Claire Light

Claire Light's fictions shift our perspective just enough off-center to render the world we know a strange and unfamiliar place. In this volume, a woman with the most thankless job in space will calculate a new kind of "cold equation" to get her home to port. In a fantastical place where adulthood is the biggest threat to adolescent boys, predators arise from unlikely quarters. In a world with wonky physics and no gravity, a lone human learns the meaning of "reckless endangerment of alien life." And an alien abduction is only prelude to a long phantasmagoric journey. Interspersed with evocative flash fictions, Claire Light's collection of stories luxuriates in the weird and wonky, half-lit realities and sidelong looks at painful truths.

Coming in spring: Conversation Pieces, Vol. 27

Through the Drowsy Dark: Fiction and Poetry by Rachel Swirsky

Filter House a Finalist for the World Fantasy Award

Nisi Shawl's *Filter House*, which Aqueduct Press published in 2008, as well as "Good Boy," an original story included in the collection, received nominations for the 2009 World Fantasy Award. *Filter House* shared this honor with Kelly Link's *Pretty Monsters*, Peter S. Beagle's *Strange Roads*, Shaun Tan's *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, and Jeffrey Ford's *The Drowned Life*, which won the award. Earlier this year Filter House won the James Tiptree Jr. Award (with Patrick Ness's *The Knife of Never Letting Go*) and was named one of the best science fiction and fantasy books of 2008 by *Publisher's Weekly*.

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