

Sleeping with Monsters
Readings and Reactions
in Science Fiction and Fantasy

by
Liz Bourke



Seattle

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Foreword

by Kate Elliott

Back in the Neolithic before the rise of the World Wide Web and the later explosion of social media, science fiction and fantasy review venues were few and far between. Seen from the perspective of an outsider, they were curated as objective stations where a few well-chosen and perspicacious reviewers might wisely or perhaps in a more curmudgeonly fashion guide the tastes and reading habits of the many. There is a kind of review style that parades itself as objective, seen through the understood-to-be-clear lens of earned authority, judging on the merits and never bogged down by subjectivity. Often (although not always) these reviews and review sites took (or implied) that stance: We are objective, whereas you are subjective. Even if not directly framed as objective, such reviews had an outsize authoritativeness simply because they stood atop a pedestal that few could climb. Controlling access to whose voice is seen as authoritative and objective is part of the way a narrow range of stories become defined as “universal” or “worthy” or “canon,” when a few opinion-makers get to define for the many.

The rise of the world wide web and the explosion of social media changed all that. As voices formerly ignored or marginalized within the Halls of Authority created and found platforms from which to speak, to be heard, and to discuss, the boundaries of reviewing expanded. Anyone could weigh in, and often did, to the consternation of those who wished to keep the reins of reviewing in their more capable and superior hands. Influenced in part by the phrase “the personal is political,” many of these new reviewers did not frame their views as rising atop a lofty

objective spire but rather wallowed in the lively mud of their subjectivity, examining how their own perspective shaped their view of any given narrative whether book, film and tv, or game.

It was in this context (in the webzine *Strange Horizons*, to be exact) that I discovered the reviews of Liz Bourke. Gosh, was she mouthy and opinionated!

I am sure Liz is never as blunt as she might be tempted to be; at times the reader can almost taste her restraint. Nevertheless, some of her reviews may make for uncomfortable reading. She jabs at issues of craft and spares no one from criticism of clumsy verbiage, awkward plotting, clichéd characterization, and lazy worldbuilding. She consistently raises questions about the sort of content in books that for a long time was invisible to many reviewers or considered not worth examining. Uncovering the complex morass of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, religious bigotry, and homo- and transphobia that often underlies many of our received assumptions about narrative is right in her wheelhouse. She says herself that this collection “represents one small slice of one single person’s engagement with issues surrounding women in the science fiction and fantasy genre,” and she uses this starting point to examine aspects embedded deep within the stories we tell, often aiming a light onto places long ignored, or framing text and visuals within a different perspective. In her twinned essays discussing how conservative, or liberal, epic and urban fantasy may respectively be, she both questions the claim that epic fantasy is always conservative while suggesting that urban fantasy may not be the hotbed of liberalism that some believe it to be: “popular fiction is seldom successful in revolutionary dialectic.”

Strikingly, she is always careful to reveal her subjectivities up front by making it clear she has specific filters and lenses through which she reads and chooses to discuss speculative fiction and media. For example, she introduced her Tor.com *Sleeps With Monsters* column by stating up front her intention to “keep *women* front and center” as subjects for review in the column.

She writes (only somewhat tongue-in-cheek) that “Cranky young feminists (such as your not-so-humble correspondent) aren’t renowned for our impartial objectivity.” When she writes about the game *Dishonored*, noting its gender limitations, she concludes: “And if you do shove a society where gender-based discrimination is the norm in front of me in the name of entertainment, then I bloody well want more range: noblewomen scheming to control their children’s fortunes, courtesans getting in and out of the trade, struggling merchants’ widows on the edge of collapse and still getting by; more women-as-active-participants, less women-as-passive-sufferers. I would say this sort of thing annoys me, but really that’s the wrong word: it both infuriates and wearies me at the same time. I’m tired of needing to be angry.”

By refusing to claim objectivity, her reviews explode the idea that reviews can ever be written from a foundation of objectivity. People bring their assumptions, preferences, and prejudices into their reading, whether they recognize and admit it or not. The problem with reviews and criticism that claim or imply objectivity is that they leave no room for the situational but rather demand a sort of subservience to authority. They hammer down declarations. By acknowledging there are views that may not agree with hers, Liz creates a space where the readers of her reviews can situate their own position in relationship to hers, as when she enters into the debate over canon and declares that “canon is a construct, an illusion that is revealed as such upon close examination.” She goes farther, as in her essay on queer female narrative, to specifically discuss the question within the frame of “the personal narrative and *me*” and how “the politics of representation” and the presence of queer women in stories changed her own view of herself.

As a reviewer Bourke talks to us as if we’re in conversation. What a pleasure it is to read pithy reviews of often-overlooked work I already admire, as well as to discover books I need to read. She enthuses about writers whose work is “arrestingly unafraid

of the tensions at its heart” as she writes about Mary Gentle’s *The Black Opera*, and devotes a series of reviews to the groundbreaking 1980s fantasy works of the incomparable Barbara Hambly. She can be angry, as when discussing the use of tragic queer narratives in fiction as “a kick in the teeth,” and express disappointment in writers who trot out the tired old argument that “historical norms may limit a writer’s ability to include diverse characters.” But there’s also room for a lighter-hearted examination of, for example, C. J. Cherryh’s *Foreigner* series in an essay that analyzes how the hero of the series, Bren Cameron, “rather reminds me of a Regency romance heroine—not for any romantic escapades, but for the tools with which he navigates his world.” Her argument invites us to consider our own reading habits—the Regency romance as descended through Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer has become a sub-genre read and loved by many within the sf community—and thereby to see how cross-genre reading casts its influences.

This aspect of dialogue creates immediacy and intimacy as well as disagreement and even indignation. But think about what it means in the larger sense: situationally-oriented reviews create interaction. Just as every reader interacts with the text or media they are engaged in, so can reviews expand on that interaction. And if that makes Liz Bourke a rabble-rouser who pokes a stick into people’s cherished assumptions and encourages us to examine and analyze and to talk with each other, then we are the more fortunate for it.

Introduction

What's in these pages?

This book comprises a selection of reviews and blog posts that first appeared at various locations on the Internet—*Strange Horizons*, Tor.com, and *Ideomancer.com*, as well as my personal blog, lizbourke.wordpress.com—between 2011 and 2015, along with previously unpublished review-essays. It doesn't contain *all* the reviews and blog posts I wrote for publication during that time, as that would make an unwieldy tome. And when I started to put this collection together, the question at the forefront of my mind was *what is its purpose?*

It turns out that's a less straightforward question than I expected it to be, in part because the component parts were originally written for different audiences and with different purposes in mind. The purpose of a review (which is a different thing entirely from the *point of criticism*, or the *point of writing about books*) is to communicate in a useful fashion the review-writer's subjective response to a text: to provide enough context that a reader can understand *why* the review-writer liked or disliked, loved or hated, or felt no strong feelings at all about the work at hand. The purpose of the blog posts I wrote for my *Sleeps With Monsters* column at Tor.com, on the other hand, is unequivocally hortatory: I was invited to contribute the column on the understanding that it would provide an explicitly feminist perspective, and I've used that platform to try to celebrate works or writers I think are under-recognized, to celebrate the achievements and the potential of women, and to try to critique antifeminist or sexist assumptions and tropes in narrative.

There are, naturally, similarities between my reviews and my blog posts. I'm a feminist: all my subjective responses to texts incorporate that perspective. *Sleeps With Monsters* is just a little louder, a little angrier, and more inclined to praise than critique—at least where books are concerned. A majority of the pieces in this collection come from *Sleeps With Monsters*, and ultimately, its purpose is more similar to *Sleeps With Monsters* than not: to be a little loud and angry. To celebrate the work of women in the science fiction and fantasy (SFF) field. To offer a snapshot, a limited glimpse, of what I think is best, most fun, most *interesting*.

Or what I thought at one point in time, at least.

I should note, however, that the choice of books to review and topics to include was guided by my own reading preferences. It's not an attempt to present a view of the field of *feminist science fiction and fantasy*; rather it represents one feminist's engagement with the SFF field, which is a wilder, woollier thing. Most of the works I talk about here matter to me in some way or another—or they *annoyed* me in a certain way. Snapshot of the reader as a young woman. Idiosyncrasy of the individual. But there's no such thing as an individual completely apart from society, either....

There are as many ways of writing about books, games, and visual media as there are readers, gamers, and viewers. I like to think of myself as a critic, as someone engaged in a conversation. That's the whole point of criticism, for me: taking part in conversation, opening it up, talking about *interesting things*.

But the project of criticism is always as much about the critic as about the text. Because I'm an imperfect feminist—especially when it comes to issues of intersectionality and representation—there are things to which I'm blind. There are great gaping gaps in my understanding of the world and of the history of women's writing; those gaps are reflected in what I read, what I watch, what I play, what I write about, what I choose to focus on. (The nature of the gaps changes over time, but their existence never will.) So there are gaps here, too.

I hope what's here is a useful contribution to the critical conversation. A springboard for discussion, a place to start—or to continue—talking about the role and reception of women's work in the SFF field.

Let's be honest. I'm not a theorist. I fell into writing about books (for money) as much by accident as by intent—the kind of accident that comes from looking for ways to turn limited skills and experience into coffee money. When I try for academic detachment, I feel like an impostor. I always have this feeling that all the people who spent their undergraduate years reading literary and feminist theory are laughing at me behind their hands. (I have academic training. As an *ancient historian*.) But one thing I do know: the issues described by Joanna Russ in *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1984) with her characteristic cogency remain with us three decades on. *Strange Horizons'* "SF Count" has in recent years cataloged the way in which professional SFF review outlets tend to focus disproportionate amounts of attention on the work of men vs. that of women.

"At the level of high culture," as Russ wrote, "...active bigotry is probably fairly rare. *It is also hardly ever necessary*, since the social context is so far from neutral. To act in a way that is both sexist and racist, to maintain one's class privilege, it is only necessary to act in the customary ordinary usual, even polite manner" (Russ, 1984, 18).

Business as usual. Without constant, careful consciousness, its outcome is the continuing marginalization of voices from outside the assumed default. The canon of literary history in SFF is a construct. Whose voices are remembered—and whose forgotten—in public awareness is always part of a narrative about what is seen as important, and who, and why. I'm not trying to retell or preserve or recover the literary history of women in SFF, though I think that's really important: other, more knowledgeable people have done work like that far better than I ever could, such as Justine Larbalestier in her *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (2002) or Helen Merrick in *The Secret*

Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms (2009). No: what I'm personally interested in, what moves me, is the literary present. The stories we're telling ourselves about who we are now and what we're capable of becoming.

By *we* I mean people outside the old assumed default. The (straight, white, cisgender, able-bodied) masculine default. It is still faintly radical to say *humanity* instead of *mankind*: if we can tell enough stories where humanity doesn't *have* a default setting, maybe one day all our voices will be held to be of equal value.

A body can hope. After all, what's the point of being young if you can't cling to idealism?

So what I've put together in these pages is a sort of wandering literary ramble: an excursion through some of the books that have grabbed my attention or piqued my interest or seemed in some way *good to talk about*. It's a personal little meander, filled with odd turns and bizarre choices, and contains more questions than answers.

My own journey along the highways and byways of SFF literature is still, I hope, only just beginning. I'm looking forward to finding new questions and developing *new* opinions, but for now—

Here Are Some Books I Read.

You'll Never Believe What Happened Next.

Part 1.
Moving Forwards, Looking Back

Discussions of books by Susan R. Matthews,
R.M. Meluch, Nicola Griffith, and Melissa Scott

An Exchange of Hostages

Sleeps With Monsters: Tor.com, October 16, 2012

Space opera. It's one of my favorite things. (Although, to be honest, I have a *lot* of favorite things.) Fast ships, shiny explosions, many technologically implausible things before breakfast... what's not to like?¹

Recently—and by recently, I mean in the last couple of years—I've been made aware that there have been, and still are, more women writing in this subgenre than I'd previously suspected. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised, considering that my experience of reading space opera was for a long while largely shaped by what showed up in my local bookshop and on Baen's online backlist. Neither of which, with occasional honorable exceptions such as Anne McCaffrey, Elizabeth Moon, and C.J. Cherryh, put much in the way of female-authored militaristic space opera in front of me.

But there's a whole universe of women writing interesting space opera out there, and if, like me, you've managed to miss out, I want to introduce you to some of it.

Just one book to start with. A debut novel from 1997, Susan R. Matthews' *An Exchange of Hostages*.²

An Exchange of Hostages isn't the easiest book in the world to categorize: it's an intensely character-focused novel set on a

1 Rhetorical question. The amount of problematic assumptions, social and otherwise, repeated in space opera is plenty large. "How to be a fan of problematic things" applies (<http://www.socialjusticeleague.net/2011/09/how-to-be-a-fan-of-problematic-things/>).

2 For a good while, all of Matthews' books were shamefully out of print and hard to find. Fortunately, Baen Books acquired the rights to publish the Jurisdiction series as ebooks, and those books are now widely available electronically. This is good, because they deserve better than to be forgotten.

space station in a space operatic setting. I'm comfortable calling it space opera because succeeding books open the universe out into a broader canvas, but on its own it defies easy pigeonholing.

It's also a difficult book to love unreservedly. I confess that I do, but I have a soft spot for impossible situations, well-drawn characters, and people caught between the rock of duty and the hard place of personal integrity. And I admire it when an author succeeds in disturbing me by causing me to sympathize with—and to understand—characters who do terrible things as part of terrible systems, and never lets you forget that *none of this is right*.

Sherwood Smith called it an “unflinching look at the physical and emotional consequences of anguish.” That's a pretty good description for Matthews' books: or most of them, at any rate.

Andrej Koscuisko is a surgeon. Much against his will, but in compliance with the wishes of his family, he has come to Fleet Orientation Station Medical to learn how to be a Fleet Chief Medical Officer under Jurisdiction, where he'll learn how to be a torturer and an executioner for the brutal and unforgiving system of government called the Bench. He finds his duty morally repugnant—he finds the whole system morally repugnant—but he also comes to discover that he has a terrible talent for the work itself and a capacity for taking pleasure in pain that repulses him on a moral level even as it attracts him on a physical one.

As a psychological exploration of the consequences of torture, it's markedly ambitious for a first novel. It extends beyond that, however, developing a thematic argument over the nature of freedom and constraint, a constant emotional tension strung between internal and external pressures. As a reader, you spend most of the book hoping Andrej will find some way out of the impossible set of choices permitted him—but *An Exchange of Hostages* refuses any easy way out. No matter what he chooses, Andrej can't stand outside the system. Whichever way he turns, he's complicit in causing harm.

The most he can do is try to mitigate the damage.

The internal conflict, the man of medicine constrained to commit atrocity, the man who hates himself for enjoying his work, is entirely compelling. Unshowily competent with sentence-level prose, Matthews shines when it comes to characterization, particularly in the relationship between Andrej and his personal security officer, the enslaved Joslire Curran. Matthews isn't shy about portraying the impossibility of any remotely fair association between the pair, although affection and loyalty develop between them anyway, mostly thanks to Andrej's unusual personal integrity.

(It takes, *An Exchange of Hostages* contends, unusual personal integrity to behave with any measure of decency when given—when required to exercise—absolute power over other thinking beings. It seems a logical argument, one born out by history.)

An Exchange of Hostages has its flaws. The third major character to have point of view here, Mergau Noycannir, another student at Fleet's inquisitor school, at times feels like an afterthought, only there to illuminate Andrej's good points by comparison with her failings. While the politics which she represents come to play a much larger role in subsequent volumes, her resentment of and competition with Andrej—and later, her determination to co-opt him for her patron—seems a touch on the predictable side. For a book otherwise so good at coloring matters in shades of grey, it's a little disappointing.

But not very. As I believe I mentioned above, I like it a lot.

A tight, focused, quiet novel, *An Exchange of Hostages* made the Phillip K. Dick nominations list for 1998. In its wake, Matthews was also twice a finalist for the John W. Campbell Best New Writer Award, in 1998 and 1999.

Nineteen ninety-eight's the year, of course, that saw the publication of Matthews' second novel, *Prisoner of Conscience*.

Is Atrocity Off-Limits or Fair Game?

Sleeps With Monsters: Tor.com, October 23, 2012

What are the rules for writing about atrocity? Are there any? Should there be? We come back and back and back around to the issue of rape, but what about torture, mass murder, genocide?

Susan R. Matthews has an unexpectedly compelling touch for atrocity. *Unflinching* is a word that I keep coming back to with regard to her books: science fiction and fantasy is rarely willing to look the human consequences of atrocity in the eye. Even less often does it find itself able to do so with nuance and complexity.

Matthews has a knack for working with horrific material in a way that acknowledges human capacity for humor, decency, affection, and survival without ever minimizing the horror. She also has a knack for writing stuff that really ought to come with nightmare warnings: *Prisoner of Conscience*, her second novel, is perhaps the book of hers which I appreciate most—but, O Gentle Readers, I'm not made of stern enough metal to come away unscathed from a novel that essentially deals with one long, drawn-out, stomach-turning war crime.

Or perhaps a series of them. It's a little hard to draw a clear distinction.

So, *Prisoner of Conscience*. It's a sequel to *An Exchange of Hostages*, and Chief Medical Officer Andrej Koscuisko, Ship's Inquisitor, is about to be reassigned from his relatively non-terrible position aboard the Bench warship *Scylla* to a penal facility at Port Rudistal. The Domitt Prison is home to hundreds of prisoners in the aftermath of an insurrection. And Andrej will be expected to exercise his inquisitorial function—to be a torturer—to the exclusion of all else, and to the detriment of his sanity.

Cruel and unjust as the rule of law is in Matthews' Bench universe, however, it has its limits. There are rules about who can torture and execute prisoners, and how that may be done. The Domitt Prison has been ignoring the rules from the beginning, to such an extent that genocide has been done. Andrej, distracted by the death of one of his security officers and by playing the torturer's role, is slow to realize that something is badly wrong. But for all his faults, Andrej is a man of honor. What he does for the rule of law is an abomination, but what's been going on at Port Rudistal is even worse. And it's up to him to put an end to it.

It's just as well there are a good few chapters of Andrej being compassionate and honorable and doctorly before we get to the prison, because reading *Prisoner of Conscience* is a kick in the throat and no mistake.

Not so much because of Andrej Koscuisko, although he's a strangely compelling bloke for a torturer. But because of two other characters through whose eyes we see: the imprisoned, doomed former warleader Robis Darmon, and Ailynn, a woman indentured to the Bench for thirty years, whose services the prison administration has purchased to see to Andrej Koscuisko's sexual comfort. Andrej may be, to an extent, at the mercy of the system, but he also has power within it. Darmon and Ailynn have none: in Ailynn's case, even her autonomy of thought is constrained by the device the Bench implants in those it condemns to servitude, the "governor."

Darmon suffers under Andrej's torture. Ailynn is not free to give or withhold consent. The horror of the Domitt Prison is impersonal: victims tortured, burned or buried alive, are not held up close to our view. Darmon and Ailynn are, and that puts the edge on the knife of empathy that Matthews keeps twisting all the way through.

It's a kick in the throat, but—unlike some other novels—I don't mind it much, because *Prisoner of Conscience* doesn't expect me to think any of this is okay. And I have rarely, if ever, seen similar material treated with half so much sensitivity.

Which is not to say the part where Andrej discovers that prisoners are going alive into the furnaces doesn't turn my stomach.

After *Prisoner of Conscience*, 1999's *Hour of Judgment* feels practically fluffy and hopeful by comparison. It's the first of Matthews' novels to draw back and show a bigger glimpse of the wider universe, politically and socially, beyond Andrej Koscuisko himself. It also probably has the least percentage of actual torture as any book to date, although with a depraved captain as his commanding officer, a secret warrant for his death, and his hope of getting away from being an Inquisitor thwarted, there's surely a lot of emotional strain on our old friend Andrej. A strain which is redoubled when his best-loved security officer, Robert Saint Clare, does something that the governor in his head should have prevented, and kills a ship's officer.

The lieutenant in question had it coming, by any stretch of the imagination. But if Saint Clare is found out, Andrej would be even more hard-pressed to protect his own. And Andrej Koscuisko has not damned himself for eight years for nothing.

Matthews' Jurisdiction novels are deeply focused on character and intensely interested in anguish, the dynamics of absolute power, and the tension between conflicting—I hesitate to say "moral," but perhaps "dutiful" will do—imperatives. I have yet to read science fiction by another author that takes these themes from a similar angle.

Angel of Destruction

Sleeps With Monsters: Tor.com, October 30, 2012

Because I've decided to indulge myself this week, I want to talk about one more of Susan R. Matthews' Jurisdiction universe novels, *Angel of Destruction* (2001). I'd hoped to be able to discuss Matthews' work in publication order, but since at the time of writing I'm still waiting for the second-hand copies of her non-Jurisdiction books, *Avalanche Soldier* (1999) and *Colony Fleet* (2000), to arrive, I'm just going to roll with what I've got today.

So, *Angel of Destruction*. Together with *The Devil and Deep Space* (2002), the next novel in the Jurisdiction sequence, it marks a significant change within Matthews' Jurisdiction universe. Previously, we've seen our protagonist, Andrej Koscuisko, act against the Bench only in—relatively—small ways, and only when in emotional *extremis*. *Angel of Destruction* and *The Devil and Deep Space* show characters acting against their unforgiving government in ways that are far more broadly subversive—and which have everything to do with prioritizing humaneness and justice over the rigid, inflexible, and *inhumane* rule of law and its application.

Angel of Destruction, while connected to the Koscuisko books, stands on its own and presents us with a new protagonist in the form of Bench Intelligence Specialist Garol Vogel, who had a bit-part to play in *Prisoner of Conscience* and a small but significant one in *Hour of Judgment*. *Angel of Destruction*, as far as I can tell from in-text clues, takes place a short time before *Judgment*, and probably explains why Garol Vogel is not in the best of humors during the events therein recounted.

Vogel, we learn, in the novel's very first pages, is responsible for negotiating the surrender of a fleet of commerce raiders—the Langsarik fleet, who fled to fight back when their home was

annexed by the Bench. In exchange for fulfilling certain conditions, the Langsariks will be permitted to live and even perhaps eventually assimilate back into their home system. Vogel respects the Langsariks and particularly admires their leader, Fleet Captain Walton Agenis. He's determined to do the best for them that he possibly can, and the settlement at Port Charid, under the oversight of the Dolgorukij Combine, is the least terrible of their options.

But a year later, the region near Port Charid is disturbed by a series of raids. The raids leave little evidence, but all fingers point to the Langsariks. Walton Agenis swears to Vogel that her people can't have done it. He wants to believe her.

Matters are complicated by the presence of Cousin Stanoczka, a servant of the Malcontent—the peculiar religious order that seems to serve the Dolgorukij Combine both as its collecting-ground for cultural misfits and as its intelligence service—who takes an interest in a raid's single potential witness and the fact that in the aftermath of the Domitt Prison incident, the authorities are looking for a quick resolution to their public relations problem.

A quick resolution means blaming the Langsariks, if Vogel can't gather exonerating evidence in time. And as anyone who's been paying attention can guess...that means lots of dead Langsariks.

The structure of *Angel of Destruction* is part mystery, part thriller. The reader knows early on who's responsible for the raids—the “Angel” of the title refers to a very old and very secret terrorist organization within Dolgorukij society, one long thought wiped out—but the suspense comes from Vogel's need to put the pieces together and uncover the real culprits in time to save the Langsariks. (Or to figure out what to do, how to choose between his duty and his sense of justice, if it turns out he can't find the right evidence in time for it to do any good.)

There are a couple of things I really like here, apart from the fact that—shockingly!—all the murder and torture in this book

is carried out by People Who Are Not Our Protagonists. Matthews is *very* good at writing character: she has a gift for evoking empathy. Here she's finally working with characters from a broad(er) palette of cultures, set at varying degrees of moral and/or physical hazard. It's also becoming clear that Matthews has a deft and subtle touch with political implications, when she gives herself room. (Has it been heretofore established that realistic and interesting politics in books are *some of my favorite things*? Then be thus advised.)

And, yes, I really like Walton Agenis. Walton Agenis is *interesting*.

Angel of Destruction is where we learn that life under Jurisdiction might be frequently terrible, but it's not *necessarily* unutterably horrible. It's a little bit more complicated than *An Exchange of Hostages* and *Prisoner of Conscience* implied: not much, perhaps, but a little.

Family loyalty, ethics against duty, secret conspiracies, politics, honor, characterization: *Angel of Destruction* hits so many of my narrative kinks it's not even funny.

Religious Revelation and Social Upheaval

Sleeps With Monsters: Tor.com, November 6, 2012

Today I want to talk about *Avalanche Soldier* and *Colony Fleet*, Susan R. Matthews' two standalone novels.

Avalanche Soldier isn't space opera. Instead, it's set on a planet that's turned its back on powered flight for religious reasons. Maybe it counts as planetary opera, but I want to mention it here because it's one of the few examples I've come across of science fiction with explicitly religious themes that also explores how religion and social unrest interact. It's not the most successful of novels on technical grounds: the pace is uneven, and the political background is insufficiently well-delineated to avoid confusion. But an interesting failure can prove far more entertaining than a novel that's technically successful but has no *heart*, and *Avalanche Soldier*, for all its flaws, has heart in abundance. Salli Rangarold, an avalanche soldier, abandons her post to follow first her AWOL brother, and then the new religious teacher he has found—a teacher who speaks to Salli's soul, whom Salli believes instantly is the prophesied Awakened One. But things are more complicated than that, and Salli has to grapple with a distrustful secular authority, riots, and her brother's newly discovered hard-line fanaticism, as well as her own religious conversion.

The content of religious conversion is something that science fiction seldom concerns itself with. All too often, the future is functionally atheistical or keeps its religions carefully compartmentalized, so it's always intriguing to see a different take on the matter, one that looks at conflicting experiences of the numinous and sets them against a background of social and political disturbances.

Colony Fleet isn't a species of space opera either. It's a story set around a generation-ship fleet about to arrive at the first of its

destination planets. Tension exists between the castes that have arisen in the centuries since they set out: the Jneers monopolies the best food, the best resources, the cushy assignments, while the Mechs get more dangerous berths on the edges of the Fleet, jury-rigging equipment to cover shortages.

Hillbrane Harkover has been exiled from the Jneers, betrayed by one of her own, and sent on assignment to the Mechs. Initially disgusted to find herself among the lowest classes, Harkover comes to feel at home with them—learns to adjust, learns to appreciate the advantage that their adaptability and their distributed, communal methods of organization has over the Jneers' hierarchical and status-centered modes of doing business. When Harkover and the Jneer who arranged for her disgrace are assigned to the same mission, to perform forward reconnaissance on their destination planet in advance of the colony fleet's slower arrival—and when trouble arises due to the Jneer's over-confidence and selfishness—it's down to Harkover to put the good of the colony ahead of personal safety and figure out how to bring vital information back to the fleet.

In structure, *Colony Fleet* is something of a bildungsroman: quiet, character-focused, with an emphasis on social dynamics. Its flaws are less obvious than *Avalanche Soldier's*, its pacing more assured, but there are moments when the background world-building seems oddly thin, as though Matthews hasn't thought through—or at least managed to communicate—the ramifications of her setup. For me this is a minor set of niggles and doesn't interfere with my enjoyment of the story, which is the kind of SF eucatastrophic adventure of which I would like to see more, but this isn't Matthews at the top of her game, either.

Or perhaps that's a judgment I'm making because neither *Avalanche Soldier* nor *Colony Fleet* grab me with the same kind of immediacy and intensity that the Andrej Kosciuszko books do. Still, all things considered, they're good, interesting books, well worth a look.

Homosexual Torturers, Immortal Rulers, and FTL
Fighter-craft: R.M. Meluch's *The Queen's Squadron*

Sleeps With Monsters: Tor.com, November 20, 2012

Sometimes I wonder how many science fiction novels feature torturers with homosexual tendencies. I have a feeling the final tally would disturb me.

No, don't tell me. I don't need to know.

R.M. Meluch's *The Queen's Squadron* (Roc, 1992) is among them. Fortunately, it's not a clichéd portrayal: *The Queen's Squadron* is an odd and, yes, ambitious, albeit in strange ways, wee book. I'm still not entirely sure what to think of it, although I *am* noticing something I can't call a trend, pattern is perhaps the better word, in Meluch's work, an undercurrent deeply influenced by the Classical world. Or at least delighted to salt in off-the-cuff references and throwaway names.

Take *The Queen's Squadron*. Some indeterminate time in the future, three nations share one world (not Earth, although Earth is mentioned) and skirmish in space: one, ruled by immortals who apparently *also* come from Earth, has something of an empire. One is neutral. And one is the nation of Telegonia, the "free mortals," who've been clashing on and off with the immortals' empire for quite some time. FTL space travel is only possible by means of "gates," with the exception of the c-ships of the Queen's Squadron, crewed by the elite fighter-pilots of the immortals' empire.

Immortals don't risk their lives. But one has. Maya of the Timberlines, formerly known as Ashata, chooses to join the Queen's Squadron under an assumed identity. Meanwhile, Telegonia has come up with a plan to cripple the immortals' empire for good. *Gotterdammerung*. War is coming. No, wait. It's already there.

The novel follows three strands. The story of Major Paul Strand, who knows the plan for *Gotterdammerung* and falls into enemy hands, surviving torture and Stockholm syndrome to return home. The story of Penetanguishene, last survivor of a race of people who know infallibly when someone is lying: first Paul's torturer, and afterwards a species of friend. And the story of Maya, as she learns to understand her comrades and comes to fall in unwilling love with the Squadron's commanding officer, Race Rachelson. As the story unfolds, and the war progresses towards the collapse of the immortals' empire, it becomes clear that the war—its outbreak, its progress, its conclusion—has been manipulated into existence.

Telegonia comes from the Greek Τηλεγόνη, and means *born far away*. It's also the name of a lost epic from the ancient Greek world, about Telegonus, son of Odysseus and Circe. When Telegonus comes to Ithaca, he goes unrecognized and ends up killing Odysseus by mistake. I'm trying not to read too much into the connection of names in a novel that puts so much of its thematic freight in concealments—of information, of identities, of the person behind the curtain secretly pulling all the strings—but the coincidence, if indeed it is one, adds an interesting layer of resonance to a story whose themes are wrapped around the interplay of truth and power.

It does a couple of things that annoy me, particularly with regard to character, however. Meluch's characters in general seem to be facile constructions, rarely achieving any great depth. The ratio of female to male characters is skewed male, and it is notable to me that the one woman who has point of view and some personality ends up entangled in the orbit of the alpha male in her vicinity. It doesn't pass the Bechdel test in any meaningful fashion: not that all books have to, but here it seems like a missed opportunity.

It's an interesting book, with far more meat on its bones—far chewier—than Meluch's *Tour of the Merrimack* series books possess. It's not quite as *fun*, and I'm not entirely sure whether

it's wholly successful in arguing its themes, but it's a solid, well-constructed space opera.

It's not half as problematic as the *Tour of the Merrimack* series either. This novel, I feel certain, doesn't deserve to be out of print.

R.M. Meluch's Tour of the Merrimack Series

Sleeps With Monsters: Tor.com, December 4, 2012

Today, we're continuing our focus on female writers of science fiction space opera (or at least, my interpretation of this category) with a look at the most recent works of R.M. Meluch: her Tour of the Merrimack series. Jo Walton has already discussed these books on Tor.com,³ but I want to take another look at them from a slightly different perspective. (Because I'm contrary like that.)

Right, so. I like to play cheering section, and I find there's a lot to enjoy in R.M. Meluch's first four Tour of the Merrimack books. (I have yet, I confess, to read the fifth one.) I enjoy them bunches—but I also want to acknowledge the fact that there's a hell of a lot of problematic shit floating around here.

So this is not really going to be cheering-section time, I fear.

The good points of Tour of the Merrimack are really a whole lot of fun. The setting has a Star Trek sort of vibe, complete with a Kirk-figure captain—but Star Trek in a nastier, much less forgiving universe. In Meluch's universe, both Earth and the reborn, star-spanning Roman Empire are threatened by an inimical alien race known as the Hive, which consumes everything in its path and is really hard to stop. There are swords on board spaceships, and good reasons for them to be there; there's spiffy space battle and tension and intrigue and caper and plot, fighter-pilots, enemies-turned-mistrusted-allies, and all the trappings of crunchy popcorn-fun space opera. Pulp, is what it is: but pulp's not necessarily a bad thing.

Plus, it has an interesting alternate-universe twist.

3 <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2012/08/romans-and-aliens-rm-meluchs-tour-of-the-merrimack-books>.

I wanted, when I sat down to write about this series, to be able to be unmitigatedly enthusiastic: space opera! Romans! Fighter pilots! But I can't turn the critical part of my brain off—it would be irresponsible of me—so now that I've pointed out the really serious fun parts, I want to delineate some of its more problematic elements, most of which show up in the first book and remain in play throughout.

Politically Infuriating:

In the 25th century, it's *Rome IN SPACE* versus *USA USA!* These are the two great superpowers. The political and social culture of Space-Rome is characterized by strong inconsistencies: it is as much Hollywood Space Rome or Star Trek's Romulans as anything legitimately built from the philosophical, moral, and social influences of the Principate or the Dominate, and Meluch conveniently ignores the fact that the Roman Empire survived in the empire's Eastern half until the fall of Constantinople—the Byzantines called themselves *Romans*: that's why the Turkish name for the Balkan region was *Rumeli*. While, on the other hand, 2440's USA is never fleshed out but appears to possess a culture, a military superiority, and a sense of manifest destiny unchanged from the 20th century.

Meanwhile, the rest of the nations of Earth—a political block known as the “League of Earth Nations” —are characterized as supine and possibly treacherous fools who contribute little or nothing towards the war with the all-devouring Hive.⁴

This is mostly uncool by me, but it'd be much easier to shrug my way past these flaws (400 years sees a lot of cultural and

4 I'd like to footnote the fact that realizing how Meluch had chosen to characterize the representatives of non-USian nations of Earth in *The Myriad* physically made my stomach cramp with disgust. Why did I keep reading, you might ask? Because dismissing the rest of us is fairly well par for the course in US-produced space opera—so much so that it took me a re-read to properly register that Meluch took things a wee step further, and chose to throw in every Craven Over-Civilized Diplomatic Fool vs. Noble Military Hero stereotype she could get her hands on.

institutional drift, generally speaking—often gradual, but over that timescale, it should still be showing up as obviously present) were it not for the other major stumbling block to my happy enthusiasm presented in these novels.

Rape Culture, the Male Gaze, and Sadistic Homosexuals:

If anyone needs a primer on what rape culture is, go find one. Then you'll understand why it's wrong that there's a deeply disturbing line in *The Myriad* where one female character is described as unrapeable. Because she's so *easy*, you see, she doesn't know the word *no*.

There is also far, far too much male gaze roaming around here, and little-to-no counter-balancing female one. Every single on-screen female character is described in terms of their physical attractiveness (and in terms of their availability), and there are some rather ...*bwah?* *It's the 25th century why is this still a thing?!* moments around the Merrimack's (stunningly beautiful) executive officer and how that beauty affects others' perceptions of her.

So much male gaze. I'm not joking, lads. It got annoying and tedious.

Said executive officer is one of the two more interesting characters, however. The other character who's more than a bare two-dimensional sketch is Augustus, a Roman "patterner," sharp-edged and sarcastic—who also happens to be the only gay character hereabouts, and who is also classified (by the reading the narrative keeps pushing, at least) as a sadist.

Does this begin to seem like a problem to you?

I agree with Jo Walton that if you can overlook or forgive the problematic shit—and there's a lot of problematic shit—they're entertaining novels that manage a really *interesting* trick with the twist in the end of *The Myriad* that informs and adds an extra layer to the narrative of succeeding books.

That's a choice you'll have to make yourselves, because when it comes to *The Tour of the Merrimack*, after I weigh up its good points and its bad ones...well, I find they come out about even.

“He Left,” or How About That War, Then?

R.M. Meluch’s *Jerusalem Fire*

Sleeps With Monsters: Tor.com, December 11, 2012

Last time, I was a little unflattering about Meluch’s most recent series, the Tour of the Merrimack. So I thought I’d leave my brief casting-of-the-eye over her work with a book I can be mostly heartfelt and enthusiastic about: 1985’s *Jerusalem Fire*.

Jerusalem Fire. It’s odd and imperfect, and some of its opinions, where it touches—briefly but emotively—on the Jewish and Arabic population of far-future Jerusalem, make me twitch. But as an examination of character, of the price exacted by war on two different men, it is an excellent novel and interesting science fiction.

I also think it falls under the heading of planetary opera, because it has some very interesting, culturally speaking, aliens. But I’m willing to be convinced otherwise.

The Na’id, a human empire, rule the stars, or most of them. A section of humanity who’ve decided that in order to eradicate bias based on race or religion, they will force everyone to assimilate to the Na’id creed and to interbreed in order to diffuse differences in phenotype. (Science says: I HAZ BIN MISINTERPRETED, but belief-systems have never actually *needed* to be amenable to logic in order to continue propagation. Moving on....)

This has worked out just about as peacefully as you’d expect.

The novel opens with Alihahd, whose nom de guerre means “He left,” running from the Na’id. A pacifist, he opposes the Na’id by helping people flee from them. When his vessel is destroyed, he and his quasi-rescuer, Harrison Hall—whose cold curiosity, self-interest, and focus on revenge forms a foil to Alihahd’s discomfort with responsibility and violence, and his passive desire to end his life—end up on the planet of Iry,

where they become the guests of the Itiri warrior-priests, a race of aliens who have been no more than legend to most humans for thousands of years. But humans aren't legends to the Itiri, who've gone out into the wider universe in secret on occasion and brought home strays.

One of those strays is Jinni-Ben-Tare, a human youth become Itiri warrior-priest, who carries with him immense hatred of the Na'id, immense drive to survive, and a sublimated desire for revenge that finally finds expression when the Itiri, in the end, cast him out.

Both Hall and Jinni-Ben-Tare are, in a sense, Alihahd's mirror-images: Jinni-Ben-Tare more so, since, as we learn more about what made Alihahd the deeply damaged yet still imposing man he is, we learn that some of the same things shaped the human boy the warrior-priest used to be.

The "Jerusalem Fire" of the title refers to the city of Jerusalem on Earth, symbol of resistance to the Na'id. The city whose fall broke Alihahd, although not in precisely the ways one might expect. The city whose role as a symbol of the enduring nature of human perseverance and of the futility of killing other humans in order to end strife forms the central image of this novel. There are many ways to read that image—though I do think that it shows a certain lack of imagination to suggest that several thousand years on from the twentieth century no *other* creed will have joined Jews, Christians, and Muslims in claiming Jerusalem as a central site for their revelation—and it's certainly a powerful one.

For a science fiction novel, *Jerusalem Fire* is very low-key, quiet, and concerned with interiority, with the examination of character. Unusual in its quietude, it is, I think, also unusually successful *at* it, rarely ranging into the moralistic or the down-right peculiar.

It does have flaws, of course. Its structure is odd, and its emotional conclusion uncertain, and I no longer find it normal to read a book with such a complete focus on the internal lives of its men and none at all on women. (Except in one extraordinari-

ly squicky moment: I've reached the conclusion that Meluch is *immensely bad* at characterizing female sexuality.)

It is, however, worth one's time—and holds up surprisingly well for an SF novel that's older than I am.

Slow River by Nicola Griffith

Review: First appearance.

The Gollancz Masterworks edition of *Slow River* (2012, first published 1995) has an introduction by author Tricia Sullivan in which she describes Nicola Griffith's second novel as an "austere, meditative book." It's a very apt description here—as it would be for Griffith's later contemporary novels, *The Blue Place*, *Stay*, and *Always*—and not at all what I expected from a book that was described to me as cyberpunk. Perhaps it is in the tradition of cyberpunk, but it doesn't have the garish obsession with its own *cool shit*, or the in-your-face swagger I associate with that subgenre. No, *Slow River* is its own thing entirely: a quiet, striking, *powerful* exploration of growth, identity, selfhood, and self-actualization.

I often don't like the way that word is used, self-actualization, but it *fits* here in a way no other word does. For Lore, our main character, *Slow River* is a journey from powerlessness to confidence, from childhood to adulthood, from ignorance to knowledge and the willingness to *own* her own choices.

Lore is an heiress and a specialist in bio-remediation—her family's business is built on waste management and turning polluted water into fresh. Lore is also eighteen years old, the victim of a bungled kidnapping that leaves her naked, badly injured, and alone on a city street. No longer wealthy and powerful. No one.

A passing stranger—Spanner, con-artist and thief, grifter and predator, the woman who'll become for a time Lore's lover, protector, and exploiter—takes her home, tends her wounds, and takes Lore under her wing when Lore refuses utterly to return to the family that failed to pay her ransom. In Spanner's company, Lore learns to reinvent herself, learns to hide so that neither her family nor the police can find her—but the price of her new

life is deception and crime, exploiting and being exploited, until Lore becomes someone she loathes. She leaves Spanner to become someone new: takes a dead woman's identity implant and a job at a waste management plant—the bottom rung of the workforce in a plant she'd be overqualified to run. Negotiating her new role with co-workers and supervisor and making friends is a new experience for Lore: one complicated by the need to work a last job with Spanner in exchange for Spanner's help in making Lore's ID stand up to inspection, and by the waste management plant's dangerously negligent cost-cutting measures, which Lore knows could end in disaster. In the end, Lore has to learn to reclaim herself: to face the betrayals of her family and move forward on her own terms.

Slow River is a layered narrative, structured around three strands across Lore's life to date. Lore in the present recounts her story in the first person: *Next time I dipped my hand into the river it would be as someone legitimate, reborn three years after arriving naked and nameless in the city.* The past Lore, though—the Lore of three years ago, bleeding and vulnerable in a strange city; and the child and adolescent Lore, alone even, perhaps especially, in the midst of her family—her narratives are told in third person perspective, estranging them from the *I* of the present: Lore as she is now is not the same person as she was before. These narrative strands interweave with and support each other, gradually—inevitably—building to the novel's culmination in their inter-related revelations and betrayals. *Slow River's* tension is interior and interpersonal, lying in its emotional beats more than in any physical peril: its sensibilities today read as literary as much as science-fictional ones.

Its science-fictional elements have aged well; twenty years on from its first publication, this still feels like a world that *could* exist: one that still reflects our own. Its matter-of-fact inclusion of sex and queer female sexuality may have been much more transgressive twenty years ago, but the centrality of queer women remains unusual in science fiction even today.

Like many of Griffith's novels, *Slow River* concerns itself with the consequences of violence and isolation, emotional as well as physical. In *Slow River* it is in the main the consequences of abuse—the secrets kept in Lore's billionaire family, the identity-stripping violence of Lore's kidnap, the exploitation and self-betrayal Lore falls into in Spanner's company—that predominate. Its real excellence for me, though, lies in how much, and how subtly, this is a story about healing, about remaking. Lore's job at the waste processing plant, turning contaminated water into the drinkable kind, mirrors thematically her growth as an individual within the novel's pages. Alchemical transmutation happens to people, too, *Slow River* seems to say—and you can never go back to who you were. Even if you want to.

A brilliant book, powerful and thought-provoking, and one that will stay with me for a very long time.

Trouble and Her Friends by Melissa Scott

Review: First appearance

The copy of *Trouble and Her Friends* that I own came into my hands quite recently, courtesy of an excellent second-hand vendor. It's a Tor hardcover from 1994, complete with its original jacket and original jacket blurbs from Gwyneth Jones and Joan D. Vinge and Roger Zelazny. It startles me: this is good book, interesting cyberpunk, and it's a novel I'd never even heard of until the 2010s—along with most of the rest of Melissa Scott's work.

I wonder if the reason I didn't hear of Melissa Scott's *Trouble and Her Friends* until it had been out of print for upwards of a decade is the same reason I didn't hear about Nicola Griffith's *Slow River* until it was published in the Gollancz Masterworks series? They both have female protagonists who are in sexual relationships with other women, and neither of them treats this as particularly remarkable: something to note, when such a portrayal is only just becoming ordinary, if still uncommon, in the science fiction and fantasy genre. I wonder, if these had been the examples of cyberpunk that were held up to me as the best the subgenre had to offer—instead of *Neuromancer*, which may be the type and model of cyberpunk but that I bounced off like a ping-pong ball—whether I would still have come away with the impression that cyberpunk was a landscape of juvenile male anarcho-nihilism? (I never said it was a *fair* impression.) I suspect not. I suspect I would have had a *much* more positive reaction to cyberpunk when I first came across it in my teens.

But I didn't. And for years I had no idea books like these existed. In recent years the dialogue in the science fiction and fantasy community has been about diversity and representation, with the inescapable conclusion that *things are getting better than they used to be*. Sometimes I wonder if this doesn't run the risk

of crossing people who were writing books with quote-unquote “diverse protagonists” before it became a marketing point out of history. Well, no. I don’t wonder. I know it does. How to stop this process of forgetting, when many examples went out of print soon after publication and can still be difficult to find? (Although at least *Trouble and Her Friends* is available as an ebook.) That’s a question I don’t know how to answer, except by taking long digressions like these.

So, *Trouble and Her Friends*. Why do I like it?

Nineteen ninety-four is twenty years ago and change, and yet the future of networked computing *Trouble and Her Friends* posits isn’t all that terribly different to something we can imagine today. Less mobile, less versatile, and more geographically rooted—and occasionally looking a little much like *Second Life*—but, modulo the implants that permit the eponymous Trouble and her fellow hackers to interact with their version of the Internet as a full virtual reality environment, the *way* they make use of it feels familiar and reasonable in ways that a lot of cyberpunk doesn’t—to me, at least.

Trouble and Her Friends opens after the US government has passed a new piece of legislation to outlaw the legally dubious things that hackers have been doing in cyberspace. Trouble and her lover and partner Cerise have been doing dubious things for years, but the new legislation means the consequences will be severe if they get caught. Cerise doesn’t want to stop; Trouble does. The novel opens after Trouble has left both Cerise and her hacking career, and between the opening pages and the main body of the novel, some time—a couple of years—elapses.

When next we meet Cerise, she’s working for corporate security—blackmailed into the job, having taken one to many chances with illegal work—and she has a problem. Someone is causing trouble for her company—among other companies—breaking and entering in the virtual world of the nets. Someone using Trouble’s handle, and who her company’s analyses thinks is likely to *be* Trouble. Her boss wants her to find them and shut

them down—find Trouble, and involve the legal authorities. Cerise doesn't believe it *is* Trouble, but she's in a bind: her boss can bring more than ordinary pressure to bear on her. And she still resents Trouble for walking out on her.

Trouble, meanwhile, is living under her legal name of India, working—almost entirely aboveboard—for a small artistic commune of sorts. She has no idea anything out of the ordinary is going on, until an old friend from her hacking days shows up on her doorstep to warn her. In short order she finds herself questioned by the authorities, asked to leave the commune, and essentially on the run from the law. She takes the troublemaking of the new “Trouble” personally: it's an insult to her name, and she's determined to find them and make them stop—and reclaim her reputation.

Trouble and Cerise re-encounter each other, and decide (neither really trusting the other entirely) to co-operate in order to solve their mutual problem: sidestepping corporate security and national and international law enforcement in order to find the truth, triumph, and learn to trust each other again.

The climax is tense, the denouement satisfying: but the real joy of *Trouble and Her Friends* is the characters. Cerise and Trouble are very different women, but their separate personalities, their drive, their *voices*, come across very strongly. I would have happily read more novels about them—but, alas, that's not to be.

Definitely a book I recommend.