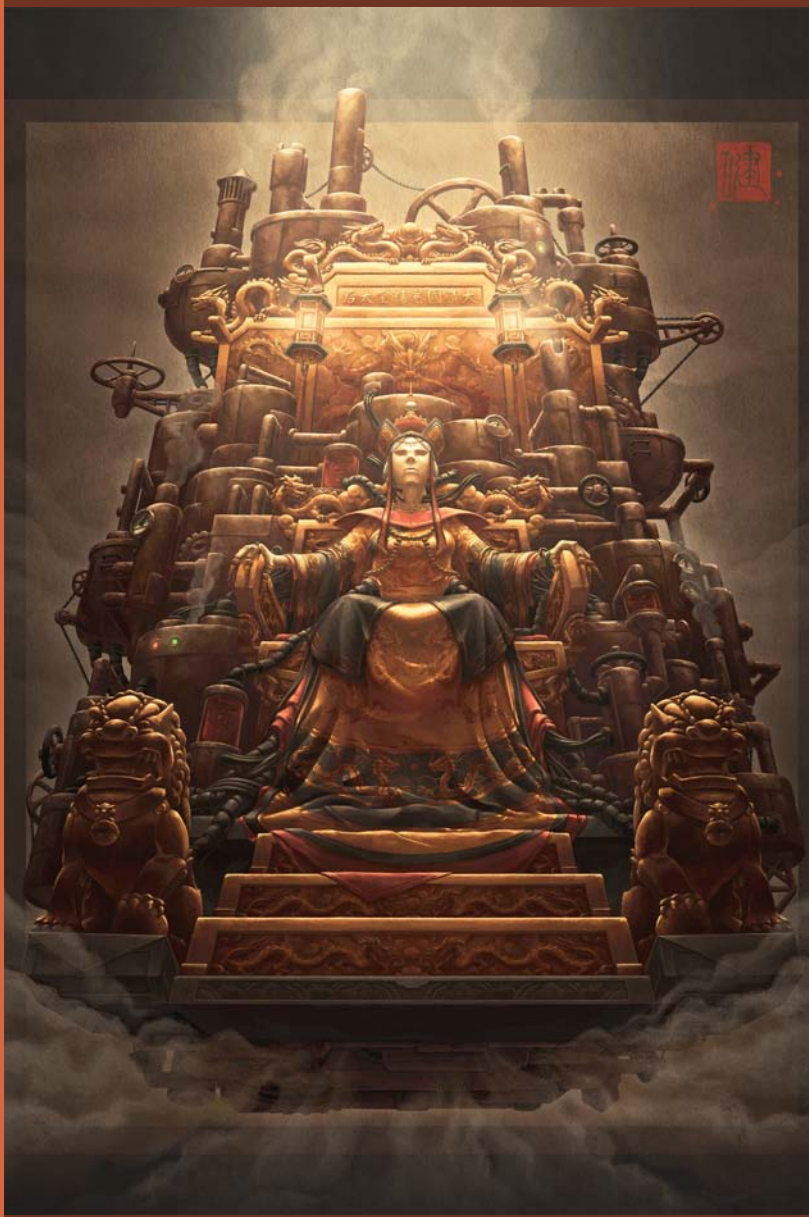


The

Cascadia Subduction Zone

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Immortal Empress ☉ James Ng

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Welcome to The Cascadia Subduction Zone

Here in the Pacific Northwest, we live in the Cascadia subduction zone, with massive, almost unimaginable earthquakes lurking in our past and looming in our future. Frequently we experience “slow earthquakes” moving the earth beneath us, imperceptible to humans except through technology. Occasionally a mountaintop blows, awing us with its power. The denser plate of oceanic crust—the Juan de Fuca Plate—is being forced deep into the Earth’s interior beneath the North American continental plate in a process known as subduction, and as the plate encounters high temperatures and pressures that partially melt solid rock, some of this newly formed magma rises toward the Earth’s surface to erupt, forming a chain of volcanoes above the subduction zone. (Brantley, 1994, *Volcanoes of the United States*) Humans like to think of the earth as the ultimate symbol of stability: hence the cliché “down-to-earth.” But in the Cascadia subduction zone, “down-to-earth” necessarily means something else. To be grounded, here, is to be ever mindful of the plates shifting below us, slipping and striking and moving magma, of sloping fault lines that separate and yet merge, of one plate being inexorably pushed beneath another, with enormous consequences.

The Cascadia Subduction Zone aims to bring reviews, criticism, interviews, intelligent essays, and flashes of creative artwork (visual and written) to a readership hungry for discussion of work by not only men but also women. Work by women continually receives short (or at best inadequate) shrift in most review publications. And yet the majority of readers are women. As Ron Hogan writes in an August 2011 post on Beatrice.com, “[Jennifer]Weiner and [Jodi] Picoult, among others, are giving us a valuable critique of a serious problem with the way the [*New York*] *Times* [Book Review]—and, frankly, most of the so-called literary establishment—

treats contemporary fiction. Which is to say: They ignore most of it, and when it comes to the narrow bandwidth of literature they do cover, their performance is underwhelming, ‘not only meager but shockingly mediocre,’ as former *LA Times* Book Review director Steve Wasserman said three years ago. And it hasn’t gotten any better since then, leaving us with what Jennifer Weiner describes as “a disease that’s rotting the relationship between readers and reviewers.”

The relationship between readers and reviewers interests us. We want to bring attention to work critics largely ignore and offer a wider, less narrowly conceived view of the literary sphere. In short, we will review work that interests us, regardless of its genre or the gender of its author. We will blur the boundaries between critical analysis, review, poetry, fiction, and visual arts. And we will do our best to offer our readers a forum for discussion that takes the work of women as vital and central rather than marginal. What we see, what we talk about, and how we talk about it matters. Seeing, recognizing, and understanding is what makes the world we live in. And the world we live in is, itself, a sort of subduction zone writ large. Pretending that the literary world has not changed and is not changing is like telling oneself that the world is a solid, eternally stable ball of rock.

Another Weather: Mount St Helens

Weightless clouds and airy rain drift over
a lower, slower weather in the world
where lava turns in vast typhoon pavaues,
thick fire beneath a ponderous earthen sky:
storms brew a thousand years before they break
in quaking thunder of tectonic shift
to hurl their hot bright hail straight up, send forth
the monstrous overwhelming wave, or still
a city into feathery clouds of glass.

I watch you, my volcano, through the depths
of sunlit air, and see you snowy-flanked
breathing your lazy steam-plume south, yourself
a vapor drifting, a bright veil of stone.

Ursula K. Le Guin

[First published in *Incredible Good Fortune*, Shambhala Publications, copyright 2007, by Ursula K. Le Guin]





On Black Literature & Battle Flags

Sheree Renée Thomas

Sheree Renée Thomas is an award-winning poet, writer, editor, and publisher known especially for her Dark Matter series, a collection of some of the best science fiction, fantasy, and horror produced by people of African descent. She is currently working on *Dark Matter III*, tentatively named *Dark Matter: Africa Rising*. Thomas is the publisher of Wanganegresse Press and has contributed to national publications including the *Washington Post Book World*, *Black Issues Book Review*, *QBR*, and *Hip Mama*. She is a native of Memphis, Tennessee, and she now lives in New York City.

A friend recently called to ask me about my thoughts on the “state of black literature” for an article she was writing. When she called, I smiled and glanced at my calendar, thinking, “Is it that time again?” As serious as a State of the Union address, this topic is one that is raised like clockwork among various circles, some public and some otherwise. Its effect is like a battle flag, a call to action. And no matter where your loyalties lie, whether you think “the state of black literature” is headed to hell in a hand basket, our literary legacy bamboozled by the boobtube, hoodwinked by hip hop, or if you think we’re in the midst of an exciting new renaissance, you are asked to weigh in—and be prepared to cite and defend your sources. I’ve come to think of it as an awkward but necessary communal ritual, one that involves a powerful praisesong of those that came before, a brief, furtive nod toward the future, and a literary beat-down of the writers who are trying to carve out careers in the present, declining readership notwithstanding. Although it’s often discussed as if it’s a conversation that is wholly new, truth is, we’ve been discussing “the state of black literature” since Du Bois edited *Crisis*. It’s a periodic pulse check that is also, by extension, a discussion of the state of black art and freedom. And like any marginalized group whose art and contributions to our world have been historically undervalued, exploited, or maligned, we can get a little testy about the subject, even amongst ourselves.

“Although it’s often discussed as if it’s a conversation that is wholly new, truth is, we’ve been discussing ‘the state of black literature’ since Du Bois edited *Crisis*.”

The founder of the NAACP, Du Bois was one of those early, testy “gatekeepers,” the self-appointed guardians of the black image. During the Harlem Renaissance she helped shepherd, our beloved Zora Neale Hurston, among other artists, barely managed to escape his critical gaze unscathed. Hurston referred to Du Bois as “The Dean of American Negro Artists” and his fellow black gatekeepers as “The Niggerati,” but satirist George Schuyler, the author of the science fiction novels, *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free* and *Black Empire* (the successful retaking of Africa from European colonial powers) was less generous to the author who gave us *The Souls of Black Folk*. The character, Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard, head of the “National Social Equality League,” was Schuyler’s very thinly disguised caricature of W.E.B. Du Bois. In his 1926 *Nation* article, “The Negro Art Hokum,” Schuyler challenged the very idea of black art, a stance that propelled him into the public eye and into a lively debate of the Harlem Renaissance. Eschewing Du Bois’ idea of “a talented tenth,” Schuyler frowned upon the NAACP founder’s attempts to define and safeguard a literary black canon. Du Bois believed the roads to the ballot box, the union hall, and the office were blocked off to black people, but two paths remained: the arts and letters. For Du Bois, literature was the language of black freedom, and he worked to guard it fiercely, supporting some artists while shunning others who did not meet his vision. But if we take his vigilance as paranoia, we might do well to consider the context.

Why is that? Because the story of our literature is also the story of our history. Why is that? Because our presence in this country has been the story of a struggle of voice—of our efforts to maintain our humanity in the face of horror, to lift our voices when others would silence us, and to define our destinies while institutions were mobilized to block our

Cont. on p. 10





A Conversation with Chandler Davis, Wooden Shoe Books, Philadelphia

Transcribed by Josh Lukin

On September 11, 2010, Chandler Davis and Josh Lukin sat down before a small but dedicated audience at Philadelphia's anarchist bookstore, Wooden Shoe Books. The last half-hour of that conversation, transcribed here, was a vigorous discussion of what the U.S. Left has suffered and learned, remembered and forgotten, from the Red Scare years to the present day. The previous events associated with the release of *It Walks in Beauty: Selected prose of Chandler Davis*, edited by Josh Lukin, had included a bookstore talk in Buffalo on August 11, a talk at Temple University on September 9, and a talk to science fiction fans on September 10, all in the lecture-followed-by-audience-questions format. For the Wooden Shoe event, Dr. Lukin had suggested something more like a public interview. What follows is that last half-hour of that discussion.

LUKIN: I wanted to follow up on another topic that was raised too briefly for my taste after Thursday's talk. And that was the phenomenological account that my friend Chip Delany brought up of how he perceived people going through the Red Scare in the 1950s, when he spoke briefly to you after the talk. He said that when he was fifteen, he came to what he thought was an understanding of the Red Scare, based on the fact that people who had, throughout the Thirties and Forties, looked at the Soviet Union and thought, hm, this is an interesting social experiment, were taken by surprise by the sudden turn in 1946-1947: "Hurrah the devil Nazi's down, long live the devil Red," if I may quote a folk song by the great Fred Small, and that their world was turned upside down and they were completely disoriented. And Delany said, "It strikes me now that that's a very idealist explanation. What's the materialist explanation? What was the Red Scare for? For crushing the labor movement?" And so forth. I believe that your initial response was, "It's more complicated."

DAVIS: Yeah. I think that the switch to the extreme repression of the Left after

The mathematician, essayist, poet, and science fiction writer Chandler Davis was fired from his job in 1954 and imprisoned in 1960 for non-cooperation with the House Committee on Un-American activities. Blacklisted from full-time employment in the United States, he ultimately found work in Canada, where he continues to be a peace activist and a civil libertarian on an international scale. He edits *The Mathematical Intelligencer* and is a trustee of the Davis-Putter scholarship fund, founded by his father in 1961 to award grants to students working for peace and social justice.

Josh Lukin teaches at Temple University and belongs to that institution's Interdisciplinary Faculty Committee on Disability. He is the editor of *Invisible Suburbs: Recovering Protest Fiction in the 1950s United States* (University Press of Mississippi: 2008) and has published articles on disability studies, noir fiction, and other exciting fields.

1945 was not a matter of some liberal intellectuals having second thoughts. I thought it was wrong, not in detail, but I thought it was the wrong approach to finding the explanation. Maybe that's the same as saying it's idealist: I don't know. I think that the hysteria came later. The first thing that happened was that the political needs of the American rulers changed. And I like to quote my friend and colleague's account of why he was being sent to the Far East in 1946, 1945. "We've got to beat the Russians to Port Arthur."

Of course, he didn't make that up. He was a junior officer: that was what he'd been confidentially told was the purpose. In Truman's cabinet, the decisive reason for bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki was to get arguing power against the Soviets. In the division of spoils after the victory, which everybody could see in the offing.

Let me just be more explicit about this than most people who talk about it. It was not just a question of showing the Soviets that we—I hate to use that first person—it was not just a question of showing the Soviets that the American power was able to explode a nuclear device. It was a





An Even Better Grip on Race

The History of White People by Nell Irvin Painter

W.W. Norton & Co., March 2010, 496 pages, \$27.95.

Reviewed by Nancy Jane Moore

“[B]eing white these days is not what it used to be,” Nell Irvin Painter says—not without irony—at the conclusion of this book, pointing out that the “attractive qualities” once attributed only to white people are now to be found in Venus and Serena Williams, Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell, and the President of the United States. In fact, Painter herself—a history professor emerita at Princeton who is African American—probably falls into the expanded category of white now in use. After all, as Painter says, “race is an idea, not a fact”: our improved understanding of human genetics has made it clear that the racial distinctions so carefully constructed over the centuries are without biological foundation.

Not that racism has died out, as Painter makes clear—a point amplified by racist comments on her book found in Amazon.com’s customer reviews. In fact, her discourse on the enlargement of American whiteness can be read as an argument that we as a society have simply decided at various points in our history that some people once considered other—but not all of them—will be accepted as white. To understand how this came about, we need to understand the historical context in which whiteness was defined. That’s what Painter gives us in this important and fascinating book.

I must admit that I originally bought *History* because I loved the idea of a book on white people written by an African American. After all, any number of books about African Americans and others considered nonwhite have been written by white people; it was well past time for someone to return the favor.

While I was curious about how Painter would look at white people, I didn’t expect to learn anything from *History*. After all, I grew up as white in segregated Texas during the years of the Civil Rights Movement, and then lived in Washington, DC, for many years, pri-

marily in African American neighborhoods. I thought I had a good grip on race in the U.S.

But as it turned out, there were large gaps in my knowledge, particularly about the construction of the idea of the white race over the years. Painter introduces us to “the earliest known human classification scheme,” developed by Francois Bernier, a physician, and published in 1684. It classed people as Europeans (in which he included American Indians); the people of sub-Saharan Africa; the Russians and most Asians; and alone in the last category, the Lapps. “It was really no odder than the thousands of other racial schemes to follow,” Painter says.

No odder, really, than the one we were taught in school that divided us into Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid, and was rather fuzzy on where various people—such as the Native Americans or indigenous Australians—actually fit in that taxonomy. In between those two systems were any number of pseudo-scientific racial delineations, all of them putting some definition of “white” at the top.

Painter’s look at Ralph Waldo Emerson (an abolitionist considered the foremost intellectual of his day) and his obsession with being Saxon has generated controversy among those who revere Emerson. But her detailed discussion of his work in this area rings true to me, perhaps because I know far too many white people who oppose discrimination politically and yet do not really believe African Americans, Latin American immigrants, or others deemed nonwhite are intellectually their equals.

For Emerson, Saxon meant English—he apparently also rejected Germans—and it specifically did not include the Irish, who were often considered sub-human. By the latter half of the 19th century, Painter writes, drawing on her reading of Emerson and Thomas Carlyle, “The Anglo-Saxon myth of racial superiority now permeated concepts of race in the United States and virtually throughout the English-speaking world. To be *American* was to be *Saxon*.”

One point Painter makes that haunts me is that the white ideal of beauty for



women came from white women who were captured and sold into slavery by Viking, Italian, and Ottoman traders beginning in medieval times. “[T]he luxury slaves, those valued for sex and gendered as female—the Circassians, Georgians, and Caucasians of the Black Sea region—came to figure as epitomes of human beauty,” an ideal that persisted into the 18th and 19th centuries. If feminine beauty is defined not just by a particular shape of the face and skin color but also by the inherent powerlessness of the slave, no wonder even our current gender relationships are so confused. A powerful woman is inherently not beautiful.

The interrelationship between construction of gender and construction of race is not Painter’s primary point, but I found those ideas leaping from the page. In her discussion of Emerson’s work, she observes, “Alongside the Saxons, all others are lesser, gendered, and, by default, female.” It appears to be difficult to separate the construction of the white race from the construction of the white man.

A sizeable portion of the book is devoted to what Painter calls the “enlargement” of American whiteness. Those periods of enlargement also include times of vicious attacks on those considered less than white, particularly immigrants. One cannot read her discussion of the Know-Nothings, the virulently anti-Irish and anti-Catholic movement founded in 1850, without seeing parallels with today’s Tea Party movement, anti-Islamic crusades, and anti-immigrant efforts directed mainly at immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

The Know-Nothings themselves did not last long as a group—they splintered over slavery as the Civil War dawned—but their ideas pop up in various anti-immigrant and nativist movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when immigration to the U.S. from Europe was at its height. It is these sections on immigration that give force to Painter’s thesis that white in that period was not simply white versus black, but native born Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent against those from the rest of the world.

As Painter notes, in the 1950s even reviled members of the Communist Party took English-sounding names—Gus Hall, of Finnish heritage, was originally named Avro Halberg—and “the CP’s worker iconography gave *the* American worker a Nordic face and a tall, muscular body.”

The enlargement of whiteness to include these others of European heritage was built in part on the discrimination against blacks very familiar to those of us who grew up during the years of the Civil Rights Movement. “With real American identity coded according to race, being a real American often meant joining anti-black racism and seeing oneself as white against the blacks,” Painter writes.

And while the idea of race in the U.S. has now expanded to include some African Americans, along with many others once considered less than white, Painter harbors no illusions about the end of racism. She finishes the book with this observation: “Nonetheless, poverty in a dark skin endures as the opposite of whiteness, driven by an age-old social yearning to characterize the poor as permanently other and inherently inferior.”

In a country in which the gap between the haves and have-nots is growing by leaps and bounds, superior whiteness as a concept is not yet on its way out. I find myself wondering if eventually we will have a reduction in whiteness in which impoverished whites will become non-white in the same way economically successful blacks have become white. One could argue that such a shift has already happened except in the racist rhetoric used to separate poor people by race and ethnicity.

But while the politics of today may echo the Know-Nothings, the science and history have improved markedly. The clear voices of scholars like Painter who can parse this history and make it readable for the lay person can give us the tools to undermine the racism that endures. Just don’t hold your breath waiting for it to disappear.

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“I find myself wondering if eventually we will have a reduction in whiteness in which impoverished whites will become nonwhite in the same way economically successful blacks have become white.”

Nancy Jane Moore is the author of *Changeling* from Aqueduct Press and the collection *Conscientious Inconsistencies* from PS Publishing. She is a member of the online writer’s co-op Book View Café. Her fiction has appeared in a number of anthologies, magazines, and online venues, and her essays and reviews have appeared in several volumes of the *WisCon Chronicles* as well as in several other publications.





Borders and Boundaries—Separate and Merging

What I Didn't See and Other Stories by Karen Joy Fowler

Small Beer Press, September 2010, 202 pages, \$24.

Reviewed by L. Timmel Duchamp

"...in all Fowler's stories, however dark, momentary flashes of light flicker and glitter, keeping one's brain ticking over, pulling the reader deep into each story's world."

"There is a darkness inside all of us that is animal," Keith Harmon, narrator of Karen Joy Fowler's "The Dark," says.

Against some things—untreated or untreatable diseases, for example, or old age—the darkness is all we are. Either we are strong enough animals or we are not.... When men are turned into animals, it's hard for them to find their way back to themselves. When children are turned into animals, there's no self to find.

The story Harmon tells, as winding and twisting as the vast network of tunnels under Cu Chi that he visits in Vietnam, worries at the border between human and animal, a difference generated by both culture and wellbeing. At the center of the story lurks a feral boy raised by coyotes, who may or may not be a certain long-missing child, a presence as maddeningly elusive to narrator and reader as the border between animal and human. The most striking moment of "The Dark" occurs as Harmon is crawling through the tunnels, when his curiosity leads him to "poke about a bit." He finds himself lost, crawling for days as it seems to him, only to be told when he emerges that he'd been in the tunnels for three hours. It's a nightmarish incident, one that puts the reader on the spot. What Harmon thinks happened might have; but he also might have been hallucinating. In telling this tale, Fowler has characteristically imposed an ironic distance between the narrative and the reader that demands that the reader decide one way or another—on pain of teetering between two interpretations—interminably uncertain, perpetually indecisive.

Reading the stories in *What I Didn't See* is a bit like Harmon's experience of crawling around lost in the tunnels and afterwards swearing something happened that perhaps did not. And yet, in

all Fowler's stories, however dark, momentary flashes of light flicker and glitter, keeping one's brain ticking over, pulling the reader deep into each story's world. Even in the harrowing "The Pelican Bar," written in a cool, even, distanced voice, the author's choice of details commands the reader's full emotional engagement. Here she conflates a familiar sci-fi trope with the horrors of real-life Tranquility Bay, an infamous "rehab" center that starved, tortured, and otherwise abused children whose parents paid the center tens of thousands of dollars a year for a regimen of "tough love." Through her abuse, Mama Strong seeks to strip all that is human from the children in her charge—sending them into "the dark," as Harmon would put it, reducing them to animal existence. For two years Norah, the tale's protagonist, resists as best she can, clinging to the small bit of self she is able to maintain. The experience of torture—not the act of torturing—sends humans into "the dark." When we name the inhumanity that inhabits torturers, when we say they aren't "human," we name them aliens or demons or monsters rather than animals. "The Pelican Bar" takes us to the place where the animal, human, and alien are visceral states of being, albeit in constant flux; its key moment lays bare the border between alien and human. But stark as its landscape is, the tale offers us little packages for our imaginations to unwrap. How many times since I first read "The Pelican Bar" have I gone back to the matter of the birthday presents Norah received the day before she was sent away to hell?

Norah's mother drove to the mall. She had cried all morning, and now she was returning the iPod shuffle to the Apple store and the expensive clothes to Nordstrom's. She had all her receipts, and everything still had the tags, plus she was sobbing intermittently, but uncontrollably, so there was no problem getting her money back.

"Always" explores another border zone, this one created by the difference that immortality makes to how one lives



in and perceives the world (whether that immortality is illusion or fact). The narrator describes how, as a young woman before World War II, she and her boyfriend, Wilt, came to Always, a commune with a charismatic leader promising immortality to all his followers. The narrator tells us that when she left home, her mother had given her some advice: “You can always tell a cult from a religion, she said, because a cult is just a set of rules that lets certain men get laid.” When she learns that men and women of the cult sleep in separate dormitories and are forbidden to sleep together (“even the married couples”), she thinks “There you go, Mother”—until the night when she finds the Queen of Hearts lying beside her plate at dinner. Still, as one of the other women remarks, “The thing the men mustn’t get is that sleeping with Brother Porter [the cult’s leader] is no hardship.” Although the narrative describes life in the commune and the commune’s eventual decline and demise, what interests me most about it is the narrator’s profound response to believing she is immortal. “I’d always supposed that art was about beauty and that beauty was forever,” she says. But living in Always, she quickly loses interest in art—or even culture or the larger human world outside the commune—and moves into “tree time.” For “only the natural world is rendered eternal.” She finds it progressively harder to relate to other humans. And she “talk[s] less and less.” When Wilt leaves, they stay in touch, but “now that Wilt was dying again, our interests diverged.” Here detachment from culture is not a descent into Harmon’s “darkness,” but an oceanic merging with the natural world. To be immortal, then, is not to transcend one’s animal nature, but to blur or even erase the boundary between self and non-animal (i.e., not conscious) nature.

A few other stories in *What I Didn’t See* explore other boundary zones—particularly the Nebula-winning title story, “What I Didn’t See,” which exposes and challenges a series of binary differences (human/primate; male/female; black men/white men; black men/white

women), and “Halfway People.” The fascinating “Last Worders” explores the boundary zone between identical twins. The narrator imagines that twinship means that her twin’s desires and behavior must always be identical to her own; she assumes that she can predict what her twin Charlotta will do or want in any situation—which is, of course, what she herself would do. Certainly both twins are in love with Raphael Kaplinsky, whom they’ve pursued, together, to a distant city in a foreign country, competing but cooperating. But Raphael has from the start preferred Charlotta and has no trouble distinguishing her from her twin. Ironically, it is the sameness of their desires that decisively separates them and makes their differences palpable.

I highly recommend this collection. All of its dozen stories are witty and humane. They’ll leave you mulling them over long after you’ve closed the book.

"Here detachment from culture is not a descent into Harmon's 'darkness,' but an oceanic merging with the natural world. To be immortal, then, is not to transcend one's animal nature, but to blur or even erase the boundary between self and non-animal (i.e., not conscious) nature."

L. Timmel Duchamp is the author of *Love's Body, Dancing in Time*, the Marq'ssan Cycle, and numerous pieces of short fiction. She is also the editor of *Narrative Power: Encounters, Celebrations, Struggles*. She makes her home in the Cascadia subduction zone.



**On Black
Literature &
Battle Flags**
(cont. from p. 4)

"Our literature was expanding just as our vision for ourselves expanded. After years of struggle to prove that we did in fact have voice, slowly we began to embrace the idea that black literature did not have to be just one color."

path. From our earliest works on these shores, the slave narratives, we used our words, our voices to tell our story and to change hardened hearts and minds, persuading them to help join our fight for freedom. And when emancipation came, we learned that the struggle wasn't over. From the first freedom schools to the black women's club movements with their book clubs and mission to increase literacy, we continued to use our words, our poetry, to change negative perceptions, to change and improve our lives. With the onslaught of time, our stories shape-shifted from slave narratives to the proto-science fictional imaginings of early pioneers such as Martin Delany and Sutton E. Griggs who created works that depicted bold acts for freedom, successful slave uprisings that began in Mississippi and spread to Cuba. Pauline Hopkins took the lost empire genre, added romance, and created professional, educated black characters at a time when popular culture preached pathology. She took her characters to Africa as explorers when scientific journals discussed alternate origins for us. With every era, perhaps all the way up to the '60s, black literature was one of social protest. As more and more women writers began to add their voices, the mission began to change. Social protest began to give way to experimentation and works that uniquely recorded the time that offered glimpses into the interior, emotional lives of black characters beyond the external politics that affected them. Each new voice, each new milestone achieved, added to what we began to imagine for ourselves. Our literature was expanding just as our vision for ourselves expanded. After years of struggle to prove that we did in fact have voice, slowly we began to embrace the idea that black literature did not have to be just *one* color.

"In a way, black writers are still fighting for freedom, the freedom to tell their individual stories in original, novel ways and to have those stories be treated as "universal" and not as the chronicles of a people; that is, one-dimensional"

We wanted access to the rainbow, but as Ntozake Shange wrote so well, that rainbow is not enough. It's 2010 and we are still periodically faced with ancient, dusty stereotypes of minstrelsy and welfare mamas, coonin' and suckin' the nation dry. As a minority in this country, we are well aware that our works are a mere drop in the publishing bucket. We

are a niche within a niche. While celebrating every publishing achievement, we are also plagued by Du Bois' "double consciousness." We know it's unfair, unreasonable, but the few black works that are published each year have the misfortune of having to bear the burden of nearly 400 years of history. When a black writer creates a new work, no matter what genre, it bears the weight of 40 million different dreams of what it means to be black and how that is best dramatized in literature. Whose writing could stand under such pressure? Faced with so many negative images of us, in literature and beyond, we want works that reflect other realities, because we know all too well how our words can be used against us. When confronted with an image we do not like, we are reminded of just how powerful our words and the images they evoke truly are. Remember, Susan Smith only had to *imagine* that a black man had terrorized her and murdered her children, and a whole nation seemed to believe it was true, even as the facts revealed otherwise. The poet Cornelius Eady brilliantly turns this idea on its head in his collection, *Brutal Imagination*. We all can point to exceptions, those talented wordsmiths who have overcome the tremendous challenges that all writers face—getting published, but then we sulk after we have read their last lines, turned the page, and closed the book, because we want more, much more. If we can still name only a handful of successful writers in certain genres, and we must keep repeating the same names for others, well, we begin to question just how far we have arrived.

In a way, black writers are still fighting for freedom, the freedom to tell their individual stories in original, novel ways and to have those stories be treated as "universal" and not as the chronicles of a people; that is, one-dimensional, monolithic.

The "state of black literature" changes because we are changing, our world is changing. As the poet Nikky Finney wrote, "the world is round," and we are constantly attempting to push the boundaries and define what it means to live in it and create art on our own terms.



A Conversation with Chandler Davis (cont. from p. 5)

question of showing the Soviets that the American power had such superhuman cruelty as to be willing to do it, even if it meant killing a hundred thousand people. No other tyrant had ever had that bloodthirsty a program, or taken that bloodthirsty an action. And how would the Soviets have believed that Truman was capable of it, unless he did it? Now, I'm not saying that Truman was more cruel than Nero or Caligula or...but the needs of the power relations were that the U.S. had to appear demonic in order to have power to make extreme claims against the Soviets in the Far East. And it's interesting...I don't know why I'm the only one who says this, but I think it's a correct political power analysis, and it's interesting that it happened in the cabinet of Harry Truman who was a loyal follower of FDR; and FDR had shown in the case of negotiations with the Soviets in Europe that he was willing to be quite conciliatory. He was not making extreme demands.

I don't understand this.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a bit of a problem with that. Because the Americans were firebombing the Japanese cities. It seems like once you're firebombing the cities, the move to the atomic bomb wasn't that different. You're already engaged in kind of a demonic strategy.

DAVIS: I think that's right. It's also true: Roosevelt was alive at the firebombing of Hamburg and Dresden; and in the case of Dresden, it was like the nuclear weapon in that it was a deliberate experiment in a new way to kill. Because Bremer Harris was all for flattening Hamburg; but it wasn't known until they tried it in Dresden that they could get a firestorm, which would of course increase the casualties.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We had already shown ourselves to be...

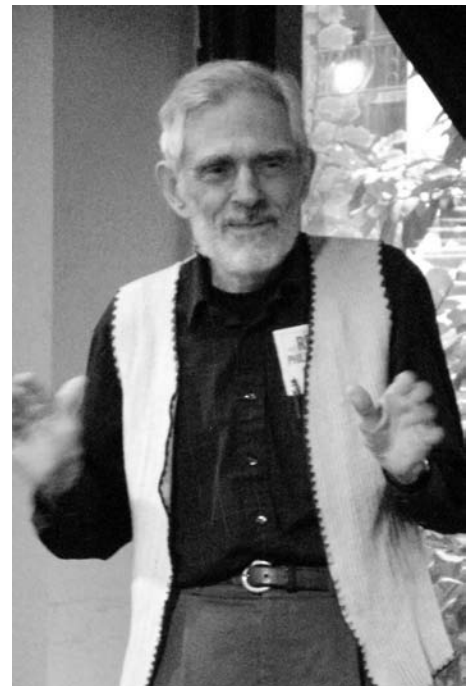
DAVIS: Yes, yes, that's right, yes. I think that's part of the same thing, and I agree

that it happened before Roosevelt died; that's quite right. But it's also true that the American power politics wanted to draw the line of Soviet power no farther East than Korea, in the Pacific; and they succeeded. Communist power was ended in the Philippines, was ended in Malaysia. They were willing to draw the line farther away from the center of the Soviet Union in Europe, and I don't know the reason for this. But I think it's important to understand this, and this is before anticommunist hysteria. It's not before anticommunism! As long as we've had a socialist program, there's been opposition to it. And well-financed opposition to it. Supported by abundant propaganda. But that was true during the war; it's just that it was expedient to keep quiet about it for a while, so that when it was expedient to be bitterly anti-communist again, they could draw on the established tradition of anticommunism; but the anticommunist hysteria came later. Maybe beginning with Fulton, Missouri; but the switch to an anticommunist policy took place before Fulton, Missouri.¹

LUKIN: There was a powerful enough element of radical anticommunism in the late 1930s that was looking for an opportunity.

DAVIS: Yeah. A lot of people were happy to resume their Red Hunt.

LUKIN: You have spoken and written on a couple of occasions of the rise of the New Left: things look kind of bleak in your 1960 essay "...From an Exile" and then of course in a later reminiscence in 1995, you wrote, "I no more predicted the New Left than Richard Nixon did." In Buffalo, you spoke of your gratification with the New Left notwithstanding the fact that you were hearing many ideas that you'd heard before; and you spoke of your astonishment with the machismo of the SDS leaders...



A Conversation with Chandler Davis

(cont. from p. 11)

DAVIS: And SNCC. Yeah, it was quite surprising that progress which we thought had been made, not in society but in the thinking of the Left, turned out to have been forgotten. Now, I don't know why there was less understanding of feminism and I think even in hindsight, looking back forty-five years, it's not obvious. It's not clear what part of this was due to a new generation coming up, which hadn't experienced the sexual liberation of the 1920s and hadn't learned the lessons of the 1920s, and to what extent it was due to some people never having learned the lesson at all. And I think that the ideas of feminism, which were around and which you can find with delight in reading things from the 1920s or for that matter sometimes from the 1820s, could be in the culture without becoming, without seeming natural to young people in the culture. And I don't know the reason for that. I think it's most interesting.

And some people say, Well, okay, you have to fight these battles again in every generation; but that's not true. Because every generation begins with a set of assumptions which are in the air, and the assumption that our kids have growing up is not that the little girls are going to have to wear a burqa when they're ten years older. There are certain assumptions which are different from one culture to another, from one generation to another. So it's certainly not true that we have to go through all the same things again. But it is true that there's a great deal of amnesia; and in the case of sex roles, the amnesia is partly because children don't completely believe that their experience is the same as their parents'. And they take their cues other places. I see many families in which things have to be gone through again, because the children haven't listened to their parents, or don't believe their parents....

LUKIN: Or the parents neglected to say things.

DAVIS: Yeah. Yeah. I think we're better off now. And I'm not saying that I think my discussion of the subject in the 1950s is now dated. I was quite complimented

by the woman science fiction writer who said with respect to my story, "Yes! That's the way it was! I was there!"

LUKIN: This is the Marxist-feminist novelist Eleanor Arnason, whose *Mammoths of the Great Plains* from PM Press is available here in this store.

DAVIS: It's interesting, because my story is not about the world I experienced. Which, granted, is the world she experienced. But at the same time, showing a little bit more acute version of the absurd sex-role stereotypes that we had brings them into relief and could give her this reaction, reversing the time-status of a science fiction story. Because my story was intended to be a future fiction.

LUKIN: The story in question is "It Walks in Beauty," which gives the book its title and certainly plays a big role in the fact that Aqueduct Press published it. This is the fiftieth book published by that feminist publishing house, and the first male-authored volume.

The story includes insights that were, as I try and suggest in the introduction, consistent with some Communist thought on gender roles that I found in the mid-1930s...

DAVIS: Yeah, we really should have Neal and Ann Koblit² here to debate this with you, because they felt that you gave the Communists of the Thirties too much credit.

LUKIN: I tried very hard, or I thought I was trying hard, to indicate that these were not universal insights.

DAVIS: They were not universal insights. I had a feminist upbringing. And I think that, though my parents were Reds, they had exposure to a kind of feminism which was not universal in the Left movement of that time either. Not in the Sixties, but also not in the Thirties. And the sources of their feminism were in part, you know, Margaret Sanger; and my mother's mother worked at Hull House.

LUKIN: Jane Addams.

DAVIS: So there's a different kind of Left, with its own ideology, which coex-

"I had a feminist upbringing. And I think that, though my parents were Reds, they had exposure to a kind of feminism which was not universal in the Left movement of that time either."



isted with socialism but is not identical with socialism; and that all reached me.

LUKIN: In addition to feminist insights, was there anything else that you missed from the Old Left when you observed the New Left?

DAVIS: What did the New Left forget? Well that's a good question, because the New Left for a few years had its own strengths, which were newly contributed. Did it need to lose the programmatic, theoretical...did it need to lose concreteness? I don't know. This is a criticism that's often made now, and a lot of time has passed since the 1960s; so I don't know how to evaluate that. But the criticism is often made now that we have no philosophy of social change; that we organize around single issues and don't fit the objectives together into a picture of future progress. Well, maybe we don't have enough science fiction writers. Serious science fiction should inevitably go beyond single-issue, because it should have a vision of how the whole society hangs together. I don't say it always does, but that should be an objective of sincere science fiction.

So does this originate with the New Left's openness to ideas? Is the reason that we do so much organizing around single issues now in order to get the maximum participation already there in the New Left's openness? I don't know. I thought the ideological openness was wonderful. I really embraced that in the 1960s. We could get a delegation up to Ottawa to sit in against Canadian collaboration with the U.S. military, and in our little band there would be Buddhists and CPers, and members of organizations nobody had ever heard of before! And I thought it was wonderful, for a few years, because everybody was listening to everybody else. But it may be that the existence of an overarching urgent priority issue made it possible to feel that we were thinking about society without attempting to resolve our differences and have policy and have a social philosophy as the Marxists claim to have. I don't know.

Certainly it didn't last long. Certainly the New Left Garden of Eden only lasted a few years.

LUKIN: We've been talking up here for seventy-five minutes mostly between ourselves. So I'd like to ask people to contribute. Or interrogate or offer questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you think that part of the problem today [is that] the political-economic Left has been more or less eclipsed by a Cultural Left that's about the politics of identity more than broader international or even national structural issues. So that to some extent there's been an eclipse of the kinds of things that the early New Left and the Old Left were about. You don't have that kind of Left today.

DAVIS: Some of the things that we thought of as Left campaigns in the Thirties through the Sixties have made progress. And others have not, or even gone backward. And I have heard the kind of thing you're talking about, the assertion that the things that have made progress have been Cultural Left rather than economic. That is, I think it's clear that we're farther along with regard to feminism. And we're farther along with regard to antiracism. And we're farther back with regard to taking power from the capitalists. Now, should we be blaming ourselves for that?

[...]

LUKIN: I think we should not. I think that when you addressed these issues in your 1995 speech, you managed to acknowledge very elegantly that there's been progress on the feminist front and the antiracist front. At that time, it wasn't as clear as it is today the amazing progress of gay liberation, to use another example. You do all this, Chandler, without turning into Todd Gitlin, without saying Those damned identity politics are a distraction. And indeed, you present an analysis or a description that points out exactly how the capitalist strictures are so hard to fight. The aggressiveness with which the class war

"Serious science fiction should inevitably go beyond single-issue, because it should have a vision of how the whole society hangs together.."



A Conversation with
Chandler Davis
(cont. from p. 13)

has been fought, and how difficult resistance is.

DAVIS: I find that some young people who accept our program in human rights and social relations still think that capitalism is inevitable. That's different from saying that it's good: even Adam Smith didn't say it was good. People say, How do you get away from it? Of course people will buy cheap and sell dear: how can you fight it? It certainly didn't seem obvious when I was young. I guess that maybe there's some things that haven't been talked about very much for fifty years. But whatever the reasons, some things have been forgotten.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can I throw out an argument from a mathematician's point of view? When you talk about the openness, and about the single-issue campaigns, I think a lot of people are theorizing that today by thinking about it in terms of bifurcation or phase transition. We believe that all of these single-issue campaigns might actually self-organize and cross a critical threshold. Like Pauli and the theorem about criticality in percolations in graphs, as being sort of like single-issue campaigns, 'cause basically you can build these percolation networks through graphs, and then sort of cascade and cause a new society. What do you think of that argument?

DAVIS: That's interesting. It resembles the program of attacking the structure everywhere. Which maybe is a more simpleminded version of the same thing, right? In other words, that our program should be to make such a situation as Yeats was despairing about. That the structure cannot hold.

LUKIN: Anarchy is loosed upon the world!

DAVIS: I was claiming in one of the other talks in this ridiculous barrage that Josh is having me unleash on Philadelphia—I was claiming that it's actually against democratic objectives to tear the fabric of society. That on the contrary, we need social fabric to be sufficiently intact that people can interact. And that in periods of chaos, there's no such thing as a democratic decision, because there's no

such thing as a democratic deliberation. I don't think this is anti-anarchist: my tendency is to resist that kind of thing.

LUKIN: "Anarchy means 'without leaders,' not 'without order,'" as a great comic book³ once said.

DAVIS: That's right.

LUKIN: I wonder whether there is not, however, a subtext, a coherent set of values among the various liberatory movements that get labeled identitarian; that there is a kind of 1960s liberatory ideal, not the coherent program of international socialism, but something having to do with how those freedoms work or should work, that's common to all of them.

DAVIS: I'd like to believe it: I certainly see coherence in common understanding and common assumptions about values in the Left today which is similar to what I loved in the Left society in previous generations. But that's not to say that the ideology is coherent. But it may have more coherence than is made explicit.

LUKIN: More questions, observations, challenges, instigations, confrontations, refudiations? No? Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Chandler.

DAVIS: Yeah, thank you.

ENDNOTES

1. See Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain Speech" in Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946, which presented Soviet expansionism as a immediate and global threat and claimed that Moscow had absolute control over powerful 'Communist fifth columns' in a great many nations, which imperiled 'Christian civilization.'"
2. Ann, professor of Women and Gender Studies at Arizona State University, and Neal, professor of Mathematics at the University of Washington, are long-time progressive activists. In 1985, the Koblitz's founded the Kovalevskaia Fund, honoring Sofia Kovalevskaia (Russian mathematician and revolutionary), for the encouragement of women in science, technology, and medicine in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
3. Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*.





Looking Outside the Ordinary

Holiday by M. Rickert

Golden Gryphon Press, November 2010, 164 pages, \$24.95.

Reviewed by Carrie Devall

This collection of eleven previously published short stories is billed as a holiday-themed collection with a twist. It's a stretch to fit some of the stories into that frame, but the book's arrangement highlights both the variety and the deeply unsettling qualities of M. Rickert's work.

The title story "Holiday" draws on news headlines dated enough to add a creepy layer of quasi-nostalgia, alluding to Jon-Benet Ramsey and the subjects of the documentary "Capturing the Friedmans," with a nod to the horror archetypes evoked by serial killer John Wayne Gacy Jr. and his clown costume. Holiday is the name assumed by the dead girls who visit the protagonist as he tries to write a memoir exonerating his father from charges of child sexual abuse. This holiday story is not heart-warming, but it does provoke a surprisingly complex emotional response for all the buttons it ostentatiously pushes. It's an incisive interrogation of holiday-related concepts such as family, relationships, memory, rebirth, commemoration, and happy endings, and what these things mean to individuals at the mercy of the forces sometimes called luck, fate, or grace, and at other times catastrophe.

Other stories concern varying scenarios: a woman transforming into a deer; a love affair with a ghost; the inner lives of women in traditional heroic tales and myths; a future where reproductive rights activists are executed in public rituals; the parenting of werewolves; a future America where children are tools in a revolutionary struggle; a fairy infestation; a Vietnam War veteran's memories of ghostly experiences; and a little girl who finds herself in a town where witches may be real and may or may not have her best interests at heart. Despite such differences, however, the stories' themes are often similar: lost innocence, the dangers of cynicism, the nature of truth and its role in community and relationships, and the human ability to endure seemingly

impossible situations and then to heal or even thrive. Many of the stories also effect an intrusion of a literal and realistic frame of mind into generically fantastical worlds. A common question at the heart of most if not all of the stories is "What is love?" Isn't that question also at the heart of much feminist theory?

Some might label this a feminist book because the author is a woman, and others because many of its active, aware protagonists are female, or male characters subordinated or dominated in some way by other males. But if I were to call it a feminist book, it would be because of the way in which the seemingly simple situations at the heart of the stories act on the reader.

Holiday's structures and elements pose large, provocative questions about "big" issues such as politics, personal responsibility, and categorically feminist topics such as reproductive rights. In this sense the book fits solidly into mainstream fantasy and science fiction traditions. At the same time it also subtly nudges, pokes, and prods the reader to make associations and entertain doubts about similarly large and obvious "givens" that undermine the assumptions Rickert invited the reader to blithely begin with. Even those stories least layered and complex hang on a convoluted frame of associations that take the focus out of such stories' usual territory.

The overall effect is doubt, uncertainty, questioning: a certain kind of emotional and intellectual sense of wonder I associate with explicitly feminist theory and literature. In this vein, subjectivity, authorship (many of the protagonists are writing or telling stories), representation, discourse, and similar conceptual preoccupations of feminist academic and political theory are examined, or at least jostled around in very interesting ways. Yet this is accomplished within stories that satisfy the usual genre expectations by evoking horror, and surprise, turning the familiar into the alien—and vice-versa.

"A common question at the heart of most if not all of the stories is "What is love?" Isn't that question also at the heart of much feminist theory?"

Carrie Devall recently won first place in the Oddcon 2010 speculative fiction contest. Her winning story, "Can't Stop, Won't" appears in *Northern Lights: 20 MinnSpec Tales* (Sam's Dot Press, 2010). She attended Clarion West in 2007 and writes from Minnesota, the land of ten thousands recounts.





Deceptively Titled Refreshment

A Cup of Normal by Devon Monk

Fairwood Press, September 2010, 264 pages, \$16.99.

Reviewed by Cynthia Ward

"Dusi" has many strengths, yet also evokes the ambivalence inherent in some of feminism's unintended consequences."

Formerly the site of Fritz Leiberesque examinations of how the numinous has infiltrated contemporary cities, the urban fantasy subgenre is now so altered by feminism that it is dominated by gun- and stake-toting modern women who kill and love vampires, shapeshifters, and other supernatural sorts. One rising star of UF's second wave is Devon Monk, author of the Allie Beckstrom novels (*Magic to the Bone* et al.). Since her series eschews vampires, stakes, and other now-clichéd UF elements it's probably not a surprise that Monk's first short fiction collection, *A Cup of Normal*, offers a mix of science fiction and several fantasy subgenres.

One of the collection's better stories, the opener, "Dusi," was first published in the October 1999 issue of *Realms of Fantasy* before anyone was applying the UF label to contemporary girls' adventure/fantasy/romances. "Dusi" has many strengths, yet also evokes the ambivalence inherent in some of feminism's unintended consequences. The titular character is the Medusa of legend. Thanks to revisionism Dusi has become an active heroine: she slew the mythical sea-serpent, not that liar Perseus. In modern times she sells as statues the animals she turns to stone. Since her gaze literally petrifies, it makes sense that Dusi wouldn't go out much. However, she stays home till heterosexual love walks in her door, which may be too reminiscent of Disney's Snow White trilling "Someday My prince Will Come" for many feminists.

Another story, "Skein of Sunlight," features a cancer survivor tough enough not only to resist a vampire's will but to whip out her knitting needles to defend herself from attack. "Sunlight's" Maddie is another strong, admirable female UF protagonist who may provoke mixed feelings in feminists when she's rescued by a male love interest. Still, though "Sunlight" centers on a traditionally "fe-

male" pursuit, Maddie isn't the only character who knits. A male teen-heartthrob vampire knits, too. And the sexy, kick-ass, blood-drinking love interest owns a whole darn yarn shop. He-man vampire knitters? That's a delightfully radical revision not merely of vampires but of the whole macho-man myth.

Knitting is not the only "feminine" art featured in the collection. In the surrealist fantasy "Stitchery," Tilly sews dead critters back to patchwork life. While she ultimately saves her two-headed lover's life via his talent, not her own, she couldn't have done it without the help of an old woman who literally knits time. "Stitchery" strikes a balance, affirming the importance of women and acknowledging the importance of men. In the lyrical fantasy "Leeward to the Sky," a woman must spin the finest sails ever to grace a ship until a persistent man's love finds and frees her. In the clever fairy tale "Moonlighting," a housecleaning pixie is compelled to crossdress and takes a peculiar pleasure in serving a cranky ogre. In the horrifying, Geoff Ryman-like story "Menders," mothers who appear to be intelligent alien silkworms are forced to breed, then boil their newborn children to produce a unique and highly desirable form of thread. This disturbing critique of slavery, feudalism, and capitalism keeps its biting edge when we learn that its aliens are quite other than expected.

Not all the tales in *Normal* achieve the sharpness of "Menders," the beauty of "Leeward to the Sky," or the balance of "Stitchery." Many may vex feminists with their melding of feminist and pre-feminist attitudes. But that post-feminist approach helps to make Monk's deceptively titled first collection a superior assembly of off-kilter fantasy and science fiction.

"In the clever fairy tale "Moonlighting," a housecleaning pixie is compelled to crossdress and takes a peculiar pleasure in serving a cranky ogre."

Cynthia Ward has published stories in Asimov's *Science Fiction Magazine*, *Garden of the Perverse*, and other anthologies and magazines. With Nisi Shawl, she coauthored *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* (Aqueduct Press, 2005), based on their diversity writing workshop, *Writing the Other: Bridging Cultural Differences for Successful Fiction*. Ward is completing a novel. She lives in Los Angeles.





Banqueting on Nineteenth Century Theater and Sexual Desire

Under the Poppy by Kathe Koja

Small Beer Press, October 2010, 376 pages, \$24.

Reviewed by Rachel Swirsky

"It is a sort of vulgar word play," muses Act One's villain, Jurgen Vidor. "'Poppy' being gutter slang for a woman's female organs..."

"What most distinguishes this brothel from its lower-caste brethren in town is a certain gaiety of intent and execution. Believing the erotic arts already twin to the theatrical, it marries the two, both onstage and in the private rooms: that is one may watch, or dally with, an angel or a costumed beast, a mermaid from the sea..."

A brothel employee elaborates, "That Pearl can be a Seraphim, or Laddie a Spanish grandee, that Spinning Jennie can make a man compete to spend money he barely has for the chance to stick it in her, lazy doped-up Jennie whom he would pass on the street for free!...is that not miraculous?"

Act One of Kathy Koja's *Under the Poppy* opens in the titular brothel when a stranger rapes one of the whores with what turns out to be a puppet. Unmasked, the stranger is revealed as Istvan, brother to the brothel's severe mistress, Decca, and former lover of its master, Rupert. The three navigate a strange love triangle—Istvan and Rupert desiring each other, but repulsed by their history, Decca becoming ever more dour as the two men whose comradeship she craves increasingly ignore her. As emotional turmoil unsettles the house, the slowly unfolding backdrop reveals that the brothel has become a pawn in a war.

The story has an epic quality, tempered by concentration on concrete details. Its late nineteenth century setting felt compellingly convincing—at times, like a book that had slanted slightly aside from its topic, examining characters and events that would have been marginal to the original text.

The period setting may explain some of the unusual structural choices. It was difficult to keep track of the exception-

ally large cast of characters, especially because of a fickle point of view that sometimes moved, unmarked, from paragraph to paragraph. The oddly disjunctive leap from act one to act two sloughed a number of interesting characters as well as abandoning the original, titular setting, which had previously appeared to be the thread uniting the novel's disparate elements.

The novel also seemed coy at times, withholding information to create tension. One pivotal plot point was sufficiently mysterious that even after several reads I'm not sure what happened. But the book didn't need to rely on that kind of trick. Its well-drawn, interesting characters were enough.

The main duo, Rupert and Istvan, were fun, despite being romanticized—How often are homeless children able to pass effortlessly in any social class? How often is anyone a prodigy, desired by everyone?—But many secondary characters glittered with still more complexity, especially Lucy, whom I originally mistook for the protagonist. Even minor characters with only a single section drew me powerfully.

Where the book really took flight, though, was in its descriptions of the theater. When Istvan enters with his puppets, the brothel's employees react with delight and excitement, and I'm right alongside them:

all the rest of [Istvan's] luggage is cases and traps for the puppets, *les mecs* he calls them, the *farceurs*: made of wood and sacking-cloth and glue, muslin and plaster, carven eyeballs and hair of silk or boiled wool, strings and wires and levers intricate and odd: a level of cunning construction, fabrication, that the players of the Poppy have never seen before. And Istvan is generous with his secrets, displaying the

"The story has an epic quality, tempered by concentration on concrete details."

"Few books I've read about the theater capture its dazzle as luminously as this one does. The performances are integral to the plotline; one cares about the performances because one cares about the characters, and one cares about the characters in part because of how they perform."

Cont. on p. 19





Rise Up Reloaded!

Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded, edited by Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer
Tachyon Press, November 2010, 430 pages, \$14.95.

Reviewed by Liz Henry

Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's *Steampunk Reloaded* anthology is an exciting companion to their first volume of *Steampunk*. The stories and essays led me through a maze of anti-colonial politics to meet alien space-time terrorists, robot gunslingers, moody artistic cyborg strippers, buried spaceships called to life by fairies, mysterious paper-and-typewriter bloggers and sockpuppets, and a couple of intrepid squid. Paired with *Steampunk*, this anthology is great for understanding shifts in the zeitgeist of speculative fiction today.

William Gibson's classic story "The Gernsback Continuum" outlines a map of the steampunk landscape, developing a ghostly territory where we narrowly escape the colonial or fascist past's vision of us as the inevitable future. Even if you've read this story before, read it again—it sets the anthology's mood so well.

"A Serpent in the Gears" by Margaret Ronald was a great surprise, outrageously awesome. Its heroes set forth on an airship for a diplomatic and scientific expedition that is just seething under its surface, chock full of spies and secret agents, international politics and domestic class tensions. The brave, faithful valet tells a story of encountering the bones of clockwork dragons powered by thaumic reservoirs. The expedition head is the mobility-assisted Professora, my favorite character in the whole book and the one I'd most like to role-play in a game. "Serpent" passes the Bechdel test with flying colors while being enjoyably pulpy. I'd love to read the results if and when Ronald fully develops its premise into a novel—or a series.

"The Mechanical Aviary of Emperor Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar" brings Persian and South Indian roots of classic speculative literature into play with its mechanical birds and people. I read it as a firm denial of the Hans Christian

Andersen story opposing the virtuous nightingale and its soulless mechanical counterpart in a fable of feminine sacrifice. Shweta Narayan's mechanical bird, the Artificer, tells the emperor nested wisdom-stories of jeweled clockwork robot inventors and lovers while taking a bold stance on sacrifice and vengeance, as well as what it's acceptable to do with technology—what should and shouldn't be created.

Aqueduct Press readers will surely be fired up by Cathrynne M. Valente's feminist/robot anarchist revolutionary broadsheets in "The Anachronist's Cookbook." She had me at the title, but the story and where it led were better than I'd imagined they could be. Valente's heroine of the street, factory, and airship engine room made me want to declaim from the rooftops about the politics of a world that doesn't exist and yet still does. This story is the perfect revolutionary feminist steampunk manifesto!

The Inca Empire, with its mighty airships and ceremonial llamas, discovers English Londres in Stephen Baxter's "The Unblinking Eye." The story's heroine, a lady of the court of Charlemagne XXXII, meets a South Continent man from Kakadu named Dreamer and learns a fantastic secret when the airship crosses the Equator on its way to Cuzco. I have to admit I thought of the very silly song "The Night the Aztecs Stormed Glasgow" at first, but the story's key twist hit me hard with sadness.

Jess Nevins's "Lost Pages from The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana" went deep into politics and history, luring me in with incredibly plausible descriptions of British naval officer Thomas Cochrane and British engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel creating tanks with disastrous results. Nevins shows other historical automata such as Tipu's Tiger being developed into deadly and super-faily weapons of war. Nevins' long quotations from "primary sources" were very well done.

Margo Lanagan's "Machine Maid"—well, I can't say I *enjoyed* its perturbing depiction of a freaked-out immigrant to the Australian outback as she unlocks

Liz Henry's poems, translations, stories, and articles have appeared in *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Poetry*, *Two Lines*, *Cipactli*, *Fantastic Metropolis*, and *Strange Horizons*. She edited *The WisCon Chronicles: Carnival of Feminist SF* for Aqueduct Press. At bookmaniac.org, she blogs about feminism, writing, and technology, and is a co-founder of feministsf.net and geekfeminism.org.



the secrets of her robot maid, but it was brilliantly written and left a big impact.

"Flying Fish (Prometheus)" by Vilhelm Bergsoe is a Danish story from 1869 translated by Dwight R. Decker. A Danish scientist gets in an India rubber and aluminum flying-fish airship/submarine to view the 1969 opening of the Panama Canal and visit the head of the North American Explosive Society. The Prometheus was a stroke of genius, hilarious and cool, with its improbable beating wings.

The critical essays rounded out the anthology very well. I especially liked the descriptions and histories of DIY, fashion, maker, and hacker cultures in relation to punk and steampunk. There's also a long, thoughtful roundtable discussion about politics, technology, literary genres, and steampunk as an aesthetic. For *Steampunk Reloaded* the aesthetic is of a baroquely fucked up revolution gone wrong, and of resistance by people, aliens, cyborgs, robots, magical beings, and cthuloid horrors to the machinery of power. It should make pulp fans, political thinkers, retro-technophiles, and history wonks very happy.

"For Steampunk Reloaded the aesthetic is of a baroquely fucked up revolution gone wrong, and of resistance by people, aliens, cyborgs, robots, magical beings, and cthuloid horrors to the machinery of power."

Review of *Under the Poppy* (cont. from p. 17)

tear-bulbs and the blood-drips, seeming pleased to answer everything they care to ask.

Few books I've read about the theater capture its dazzle as luminously as this one does. The performances are integral to the plotline; one cares about the performances because one cares about the characters, and one cares about the characters in part because of how they perform.

Intelligent descriptions and a compelling cast make reading *Poppy* an intense, lingering experience. I could make quibbles—the villains read as flat, and I'm tired of sexual sadism symbolizing "bad person"—but there was so much texture. Each section was a burst of images. I wanted to read it as slowly as I might eat a rich meal—savoring each bite before taking another.

Koja's biography indicates that a stage adaptation of the first half of *Poppy* will debut in 2011. I hope the production is successful because I'd love to see this on stage.

Rachel Swirsky lives in Bakersfield, California, with her husband and a pathetically expanding circle of cats. Her short fiction has been nominated for the Hugo and the Nebula awards and collected by Aqueduct Press in *Through the Drowsy Dark*. Visit her website at <http://rachelswirsky.com>.

Coming to the Zone—

The next issue of *The Cascadia Subduction Zone* will launch "Grandmother Magma," a continuing feature for commentary on important works from the past in sci-fi, feminism, and other fields that have shaped and continue to influence contemporary writers in fiction and nonfiction today. These selected formative works comprise important veins within, if not the bedrock of, today's speculative fiction. Ursula LeGuin will author the first Grandmother Magma piece with her commentary on Vonda McIntyre's novel *Dreamsnake*.





Her Enduring Legacy

80! Memories and Reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin

Karen Joy Fowler and Debbie Notkin, editors

Aqueduct Press, October 2010, 232 pages, \$19.

Reviewed by Victoria Garcia

"A warm, eclectic, and often highly rewarding read, the book is recommended for Le Guin fans and those interested in the history and practice of writing science fiction."

In honor of Ursula Le Guin's 81st birthday, Aqueduct Press has released an anthology celebrating her life and work. The book collects pieces long and short, academic and casual, in poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction. A warm, eclectic, and often highly rewarding read, the book is recommended for Le Guin fans and those interested in the history and practice of writing science fiction.

This book is unusual in that it was originally designed for a readership of one. Last year, well before Aqueduct issued it as a quality paperback, it was printed in a single-copy edition. Hand-bound in green leather, it was presented to Le Guin in honor of her 80th birthday. *80!* is the manifestation of decades of love and admiration, awe and gratitude. As such, it is a rather humbling thing to behold.

Though the book's focus is narrow, the scope of Le Guin's influence has been broad indeed, and the best parts of the anthology reflect this breadth. MJ Hardman, a professor of anthropology and linguistics, writes about the effect Le Guin's work had on the evolution of Hardman's own theories of communication and her efforts to preserve endangered languages. This unique and valuable article does an excellent job of both underscoring Le Guin's impact and introducing the reader to a fascinating field of study and a compelling cause. Deirdre Byrne frames Le Guin's work in terms of the therapeutic narrative, showing the ways Le Guin's storytelling captures core psychological truths about abuse, dehumanization, healing, and the creation of self.

Other contributors discuss the effect that Le Guin's work has had on the evolution of science fiction. Some focus on wordcraft and narrative form. Jed Hartman, a founding editor of the

Internet periodical *StrangeHorizons.com*, provides a solid dissection of "On the High Marsh," explaining how it defies (or ignores) many of the accepted rules of SFnal storytelling, and why it succeeds anyway. Hartman's essay would be particularly useful and enlightening for young writers and those who teach and edit them. Several pieces focus on Le Guin's philosophical, intellectual, and political contributions to the field. Eleanor Arnason's "Seven Ways of Looking at Le Guin" does a particularly good job of this, touching on Taoism, feminism, anthropology, aging, and more.

80! also contains quite a few reminiscences by notable fiction writers about how Le Guin's work and teaching shaped their creative lives. While all of these are worthwhile, many of them tread similar ground and tend to blend together after a while. There are several stand-outs, however, such as Eileen Gunn's discussion of how Le Guin's experiments with subjectivity and point of view provided her with an alternative to the textual experiments of writers like Frederick Barthelme. Also outstanding is Ellen Kushner's piece on how, as a teen, she came to love Le Guin more than Tolkien, at the risk of becoming a pariah among her Middle Earth-adoring friends.

Other pieces provide gentle insight into Le Guin as a human being. Vonda McIntyre's essay, which has a pleasingly punchy tone, talks about Le Guin's love of robot toys, her musical taste, and her "mutinous" tendencies as a teacher. Julie Phillips's contribution (one of the meatiest and most satisfying in the book) distills decades of research and interviews into a fascinating 20-page biographical survey. In it we learn about Le Guin's family, and about how war, anthropology, and make-believe shaped her childhood. We also learn about the genesis of the Orsinian tales and about the whirlwind shipboard romance with young historian Charles Le Guin, which grew into a sustaining partnership that survives to this day.

A handful of the contributors chose to celebrate Le Guin through fiction. These entries are among the most powerful in



the book. A group of short stories by Andrea Hairston, Sheree Renée Thomas, Ama Patterson, and Pan Morigan of the Beyon'Dusa group form a significant part of the book's heart. Taking on Le Guinian themes such as aging, ethics, and the uses of storytelling, these tales range in tone from slice-of-life narrative to dreamscape to dragon-centered fantasy, and each one is a pure delight. John Kessel's similarly smart contribution, "The Closet," is taut and fleet, and delivers a solid bite.

And yet, as engaging as the book is, in many ways it feels like an appetizer rather than a main course. As I read, I often found myself yearning for more: more detail, more historical framing, and more analytical depth. I couldn't help but compare this work to Jean Stein and George Plimpton's 1994 book on Warhol muse Edie Sedgwick, *Edie:*

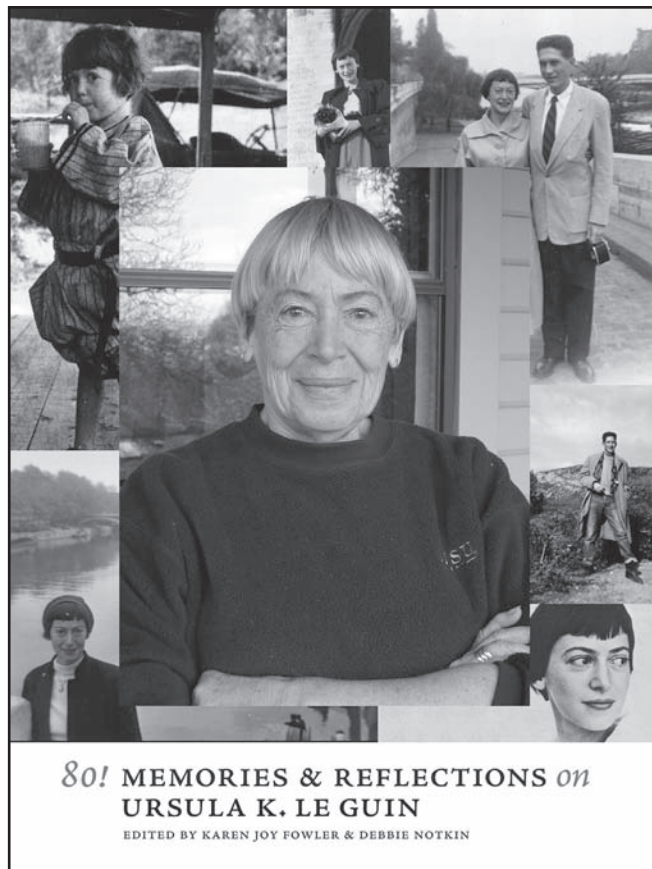
"The real hazard of a book like this is that at all of its finest moments it makes you long to be reading something else—namely, Le Guin. This book does that admirably."

American Girl. Like *80!*, *Edie* is largely composed of reminiscences by the people who knew, loved, or were stunned by its subject—but many of Stein and Plimpton's informants come from walks of life beyond the creative and academic realms: from high society, rehab clinics, and biker gangs; and not all their words are kind. *Edie's* range, candor, and richness of source material provide a level of intellectual satisfaction that *80!* does not. The comparison may be unfair, though: A thorough and dispassionate assessment of a person's import as an artist and a human being might make a compelling book, but it would be a truly lousy birthday present.

The real hazard of a book like this is that at all of its finest moments it makes you long to be reading something else—namely, *Le Guin*. This book does that admirably. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go finish *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Victoria Elizabeth Garcia

is a graduate student in biology at the University of Washington, where she studies the cellular bases of fertility and infertility in the male fruit fly. Her fiction has been published in *Polyphony*, *The Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Seattle with her husband, comics creator John Aegard, and a grumpy but well-loved little dog.



Imperial Steamworks

James Ng



Key Keeper

James Ng (pronounced Ing) was born in Hong Kong, where he spent most of his childhood drawing monsters and robots, making his own elaborate cardboard toys, and playing soccer. Ever since, he has been on the move between Hong Kong, Vancouver, Chicago, and New York. His travels have greatly influenced him, allowing him to combine eastern and western cultures in his artwork.

As a small child, James already knew he wanted to be an artist. He learned to use crayons to draw before he could use chopsticks to eat. James started art classes at age three, and never stopped. After high school in Hong Kong, he went to the Art Institute of Chicago on a scholarship and later transferred to the School of Visual Arts in New York to finish his Bachelor in Fine Arts.

What you see here are pieces from James's Imperial Steamworks series, which he began working on in 2008. The idea for the project stemmed from his interests and his environment while growing up.

James considers research critical to his work. He read a lot of Chinese history books before beginning to work on the series. He also read about the Industrial Revolution in England. He has studied the Chinese Qing Dynasty and the modernization of non-European countries. The Qing Dynasty was the last dynasty in Imperial China; during this period of time China was invaded by other countries that had already gone through an industrial revolution. The foreign powers forced them to sign unfair trade treaties and to give up land to foreign rule. His home, Hong Kong, was one of these lands. Since then, Western countries have set the bar for being "the modern city." The standard of modernization is basically westernization—as China becomes more modern, it also be-

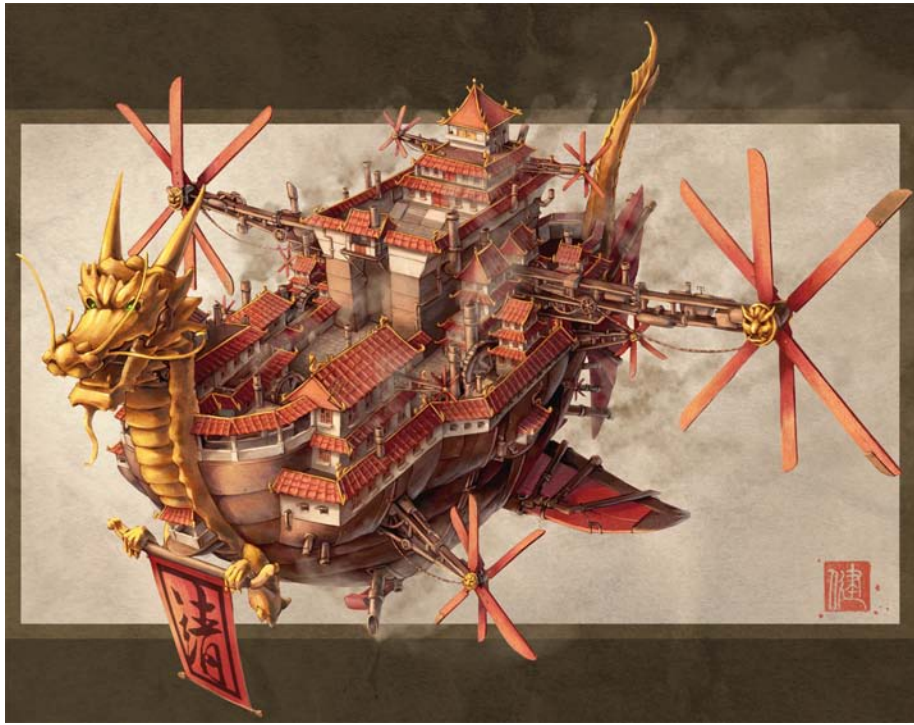
comes more like the West. James began to wonder—what if China had been the first to modernize during the turn of the last century, if China had become the standard that other countries had to work towards, what would things look like today? Perhaps China would still be in imperial rule. Maybe skyscrapers would look like Chinese temples. Cars would look like carriages. And maybe we would have fantastical machines that look both futuristic and historic.

It wasn't until James started posting his series online that he heard the term "steampunk," as people began to call it that. In fact, the use of so many steam machines in his artwork is directly linked to his personal interests: he depicts the era during the turn of the century when steam power was the very thing that drove the English Industrial Revolution. Now James refers to his series as "Chinese Steampunk." For him, though, it's not just a play on merging two types of visuals. It is quite representative of himself as a person, his interests and thoughts.

Various pieces from the Steamworks have appeared in print and have won awards. In 2009, "Immortal Empress" and "Imperial Airship" were in the Society of Illustrators show, with the ship winning a scholarship award. And James was honored with the Digital Artist 2009 award for the piece "Night Patrol." This spring, another of James's incredibly intricate pieces, "Thought Process," which is not part of the Steamworks series, will be the cover illustration for *The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 5: Writing and Racial Identity*, edited by Nisi Shawl. (Check it out on his website.)

What's next for this dense and evocative work? James's dream project would be for a company to buy the series as an idea to be made into a universe for a computer game or movie, then hire him as art director for the whole project. That would be one awesome visual world for us all to explore!





Imperial Airship



Imperial Inventor

To see more James's work and find out how you can purchase prints of the pieces shown here:
<http://www.jamesngart.com/>



Court Band



Winter 2011 Releases from Aqueduct Press



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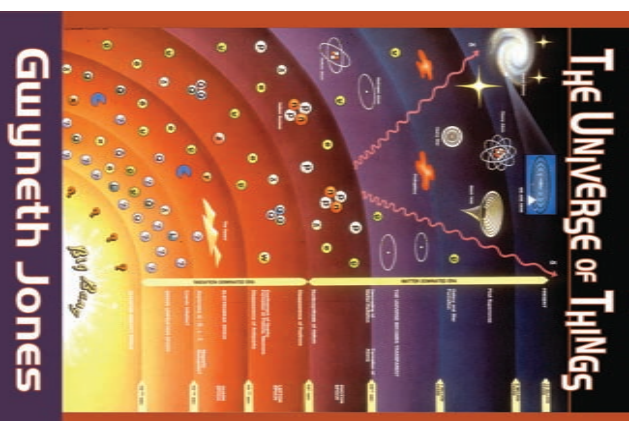
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