

The

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Flower Man ☉ Mr. Mead

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IN THIS ISSUE





# Can Science Fiction Change the World?

Essay by Kristin King

A decade into the twenty-first century, our world is facing more threats than we can count: catastrophic global warming, environmental degradation, wars, and convulsive economic crises. And as far as I can tell from my vantage point as an English speaker in the United States, nobody anywhere in the world has a plan good enough to save humanity from itself. In the US particularly, our Left is in sorry shape. In the twentieth century, enormous social movements such as socialism, Women's Liberation, and the Civil Rights movement galvanized large sections of the population and gave them hope for a better world. But none of these movements gained enough ground to become sustainable, and over time they weakened and also fragmented into a host of single-issue and identity-issue movements. Now leftists in the US and elsewhere are asking, What do we need to do? How do we build the social and political movements that will save the world?

A successful social movement needs vision—dreams big enough for large numbers of people to believe in. But not just any old dreams. We've already had plenty of the wrong sort. To take just two examples, the US dream of Western expansion led to genocide, and the dream of the dictatorship of the proletariat led to Stalinist Russia. Such collective dreams have given political visions a bad name. And yet we do need visions of different futures, in which humanity as a whole successfully promotes the health and welfare of the entire world rather than the enrichment of the wealthiest one percent. Where do new visions of a better future come from?

Many science fiction readers believe science fiction can be a visionary force for change. They have the idea that science fiction can plant the seed of an idea—a vision of a better society—that will motivate people to act, and in that way change the world. I call that the Johnny Appleseed model. Though it's a start, it doesn't go far enough. Sure, sometimes you can just toss a seed down and it will grow into a tree. But a seed has a better chance of growing

when it is watered, tended, and watched. Maybe even nourished with compost and protected from invasive species. At some point, if it grows into a rich, fruit-producing tree, the gardener can come back, enjoy its fruits, and acquire more seeds to plant. To move from inspiration to social change, we need not only Johnny Appleseeds, but also gardeners, the organizers who make a plan and do the work of carrying it out.

But in my opinion, formed after spending fifteen years working with anarchists and other leftists, activists and organizers in the United States are not equipped to form or carry out an effective plan for saving the world. They have visions and goals and a desire to get right to work, but something is missing: a dream that speaks to the soul and that combines a vision for positive change with a complex understanding of the world's peoples and problems.

And that's where the readers, editors, and authors of speculative fiction can contribute. We're all collectively dreaming. We make the dream, or we read it, or we share it with someone else. Organizers are often readers of speculative fiction, and often participate in the collective dreaming whenever they pick up a book.

But there is potential for an even closer collaboration, in which the dreamers and the organizers spend time talking to each other—hosting a salon or party, perhaps, and sharing what lights a spark in us. Suppose a reader got really excited about a story with a vision for social change and told all her friends about it. A friend, who is an organizer, might try implementing it. The result, of course, would be nothing like what the story's author imagined. But it would be interesting, and full of story. The organizer might tell the author of the story what happened with her idea, and the author might be inspired to write yet another story. Of course, that second story would be nothing like the organizer might herself have imagined, but it could be a great story, and it could form a seed for a successful social movement that nobody has, as yet, imagined.

*[L]eftists in the US and elsewhere are asking: what do we need to do? How do we build the social and political movements that will save the world?*

*[W]e do need visions of different futures, in which humanity as a whole successfully promotes the health and welfare of the entire world rather than the enrichment of the wealthiest one percent.*

*[A]ctivists and organizers in the United States are not equipped to form or carry out an effective plan for saving the world. They have visions and goals and a desire to get right to work, but something is missing: a dream that speaks to the soul*



# Change the World

(cont. from p. 3)

*[W]e were struck by the influence of speculative fiction on our political development.*

Synchronicity, collaboration, learning: we change our dreams; our dreams change us. This kind of collaboration needs to happen more often.

In 2009, I was a member of the anarchist/socialist organization Common Action. We engaged in coalition-building, social justice work, and the development of new theories. On comparing notes, we were struck by the influence of speculative fiction on our political development. We were also inspired by a science fiction and fantasy discussion group in Chicago called Think Galactic, which was founded by three anarchists reflecting on their experience at the WisCon science fiction convention.

We decided to host a panel on speculative fiction at Seattle's annual anarchist book fair. Ariel Wetzell, Lambert Rochfort, and I planned the panel "Beyond The Dispossessed: Anarchism and Science Fiction." We invited L. Timmel Duchamp, Nisi Shawl, Eileen Gunn, and Saab Lofton, and then we put together a list of science fiction texts that had influenced us—not just anarchist books, but other anti-authoritarian texts, feminist books, and world-imagining books.

Here are a few of the works that I chose to discuss on the panel, either because they have influenced my politics, or because they question political assumptions that anarchists and other leftists often make:

(1) Octavia E. Butler's trilogy *Lilith's Brood*. *Lilith's Brood* poses a question that anarchists need to answer. Is it possible that the human race is doomed to wipe itself out because genetically, humans dangerously combine both hierarchical tendencies and great intelligence? Anarchism seeks to abolish hierarchy, but to what degree is that possible? It is common for anarchist groups to eradicate their formal hierarchical structures only to miss informal hierarchies. As I see it, the aim of anarchism needs to evolve—not to hide from hierarchy, but to confront it openly and to establish egalitarian relationships wherever we can.

(2) Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. Anarchists often take the book's civilization on the moon of Anarres as a role model for a utopian society, but as Le

Guin has pointed out, it is an *ambiguous* utopia. In it, the ideals of anarchism have been institutionalized. In their fervor to stop marriage partnerships from becoming ownership, the citizens set up rules that work against Shevek and his wife, giving them job assignments far away from each other. The parallel in the real world is that groups of anarchists tend to crystallize their ideals into rules, and the people who aren't living by the rules are excluded from the group because they aren't anarchist enough.

(3) L. Timmel Duchamp's five-book *Marq'ssan Cycle*. Where many utopias present a harmonious and orderly view of society, the *Marq'ssan Cycle* presents a region in struggle. The Pacific Northwest *Free Zone*, another ambiguous anarchist utopia, is perpetually defending itself against threats from both inside and out. The *Free Zone* is a work in progress, as any society, anarchist or not, will always be. As such, it's a more realistic role model than a full-fledged utopia. (We just need some extraterrestrials to defend the *Zone*, and we'll be set.)

The *Marq'ssan Cycle* also presents an important figure, Hazel. She is just an ordinary woman, gradually drawn into political action. How many role models are there for ordinary women? Not a lot. We ordinary women can't imagine ourselves becoming politically active because we've never seen ourselves as heroes, and it's partly as a result of this that many groups of leftists are male-dominated. But Hazel models an ordinary woman hero, who is a bit bemused when people outside the *Zone* see her as a dangerous radical, because her work within the *Zone* feels so natural and ordinary. In other words, she is building revolution the same way she used to make coffee as a secretary.

(4) China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun*. I chose this novel because of Deeba, who at first plays second fiddle to the Real Heroine. She's an unlikely heroine, rather an un-hero who ends up having to take on somebody else's quest. What happens when she uncovers a plot and presents it to the Real Authorities? She discovers they're more invested in their own power than in

*Cont. on p. 20*

*[W]e put together a list of science fiction texts that had influenced us*



# Where are you?

by Mary Meriam

Sappho

Sometimes while I'm writing, I call out for you:  
*Where are you?* A flock of goldfinches answers,  
chirping in the yard, but not in my language.

Wu Tsao

*In what corner of the heavens is she?* The farmer  
loses her memory, though her greens are as sweet as  
ever.

Christina Rossetti

I see her waiting on the corner for the yellow school  
bus, smoking with some boys, books aside. There is  
no history, science, poetry to explain this. The  
scholars have searched. The poets assure me.

Emily Dickinson

Susie. I said your name, and they took your name  
away from me. What's with them? Now and ever:  
*Where are you?*

Amy Lowell

My secret garden. My bed. My table. I bring you here  
and fall weeping at your feet, for all the blue lights of  
day and night, while they last. I have a mansion. I am  
determined.

Charlotte Mew

How I delight in her white blouse, the accidental  
brush of her against me, the way the wind blows her  
hair in all directions, sometimes in my direction. This  
is a crime, they say, and I burn inside and out for the  
sake of her, though we never touch. My touch is  
white smoke.

Hilda Doolittle

Say I am in love with her. Say I give her all my  
pearls and years go by, pearl by pearl, until the strand  
is empty. Then my lungs have lost the use of calling:  
*Where are you?*

Anne Sexton

Putrid, I inhaled. Pure, I finished. Early I learned the  
place that storytellers go. I went there to find her,  
Hilda, Charlotte, Christina, Emily. Let the dress fall  
from her shoulder.

Adrienne Rich

Her face is so full of feeling. My face is feeling. No  
place for proms, our bed. The balloon is rising, and  
the rivers are colliding. Are you home?

Judy Grahn

I take mountains, cities, bridges in stride, but she, oh  
she with her eyes takes me in her arms. I take skies in  
stride, but she with her red womb makes me  
speechless.

Marilyn Hacker

What we do together. Then what we do apart. Then  
what I do without you where the unrelenting dark  
thunders. Be with me again.

Jackie Kay

How sharp the nettles of longing. *Where are you?*  
We had this whole house, rooms full. Never dull. I go  
galloping over and over, round and round the track. I  
lack the apple without you.

---

Mary Meriam's poems have appeared recently in *The New York Times*, *Poetry Foundation*, *American Life in Poetry*, and *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics*. She is the author of *The Countess of Flatbroke* (Modern Metrics, 2006) and *The Poet's Zodiac* (Seven Kitchens, 2011), and the editor of *Filled with Breath: 30 Sonnets by 30 Poets* (Exot, 2010) and *Lavender Review* <<http://lavrev.net>>.





## Diving into the Dream

*Memoirs of a Spacewoman* by Naomi Mitchison

An Appreciation by Gwyneth Jones

*Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, according to Hilary Rubinstein, who introduces my New English Library edition (1976), “is not a *memoir*.” The fictional narrator of this Sixties classic gives no account of her childhood, her background, her early struggles. She plunges us into the midst of a rich and perilous scientific career, with the minimum of modest preamble: “*I think about my friends and the fathers of my children, I think about my children...*” But that’s how Naomi Mitchison does things, as an acquaintance with all her writing will show you. It’s the way she lived her life, arguably. No reservations, no hesitation, just dive in.

Mary the Spacewoman calls herself a “communicator.” I want to call her a *xeno-semanticist*, because there’s nothing soft-focus about her work. She and her fellow scientists/explorers risk their lives and sanity on field trips to alien planets, attempting to make contact, generally nonverbal, with whatever conscious life they find. Mary’s training involves many hours of “contemplation,” which I *know* I’m going to call meditation, but that’s only half of it. The rest is lab science. The technique is to find out what works in the field by exposing yourself to the alien presence, then coming home and tracking down the chemistry behind the meeting (Mary’s contemporaries are fully aware of the molecular basis of biological communication). Horrible allergic reactions, devastating emotions, vomiting fits are a common hazard; if things get even more invasive, that’s just part of the job. If Martians (friendly three-foot-high bipedal King Crabs) communicate with their sex organs, Mary will cheerfully strip and do likewise, at whatever cost. If volunteers are needed to have living, alien, pseudo-embryos grafted to their bodies, Mary is fearlessly intrigued—it’s this last research project that nearly costs her her sanity.

SF “realism” is not an issue. We never know what a spaceship looks like; we never find out how “time-blackout” travel works, except that it keeps you young, while those

who stay at home grow old. Ironically, what Naomi Mitchison—herself removed from education at puberty, like a proper Edwardian young lady—achieves, is that rare thing in science fiction, a convincing portrait of scientists at work (I think of Asimov’s *The Gods Themselves*, as being in the same mode). It’s the world of her father and her brother, both eminent scientists, and of her social circle, which included James Watson of DNA fame: but here she makes it her own.

As in real life, the most troubling problems the scientists face are ethical ones. It’s the pursuit of pure knowledge, versus the dreaded Mineral Ministry—wreckers of living worlds. It’s the highly intelligent centipedoids, who use attractive warm-blooded bipeds as their principal food-source. It’s the poignant First Contact adventure with the “caterpillars and the butterflies,” where one team-member, passionate and impulsive Françoise, finds her duty of non-interference tested beyond the limit. If there is a single agenda in these encounters, it’s the problem of Utopia, echoing Mitchison’s own Utopian writings and asking questions like those posed by Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Can we live without exploitation? Is it ethical to sacrifice the wellbeing of the masses to the hope of a perfected future? Is it logically possible to contact another species (or race) without “interfering”?

When I first read *Memoirs*, I knew two modes of approved mainstream sf female characters: the feisty perfect girlfriend and the nurturing perfect mother. I knew the deconstruction and reaction against these

*SF “realism” is not an issue. We never know what a spaceship looks like; we never find out how “time-blackout” travel works, except that it keeps you young, while those who stay at home grow old.*



stereotypes, in the fiction of Joanna Russ, Suzy Charnas, Ursula Le Guin. I hadn't yet encountered Octavia Butler's fiction, which does something more and different. I'd never met an sf character like this before: a woman of the future, actually *behaving* like Joanna Russ's "Female Man." Mary doesn't struggle against oppression: there isn't any. She's casually heroic, cool in danger; convinced that her *female* qualities are of inestimable intellectual value. As a young woman, and just like your average male scifi hero, she barely notices the opposite sex, except sexually, or as prospective fathers for her children. And all without a word of apology or explanation; it's just the way things are.... It was insouciant; it was astonishing.

Maybe Naomi Mitchison might have called herself a womanist, not a feminist, if she'd known both terms the way they're used today. But despite her privileged caste, she suffered oppression, and despite the richness of her life, she dreamed the same dreams as the rest of us. In *Memoirs*, she lives the dream.

*If there is a single agenda in these encounters, it's the problem of Utopia... asking questions like... Can we live without exploitation? Is it ethical to sacrifice the wellbeing of the masses to the hope of a perfected future? Is it logically possible to contact another species (or race) without "interfering"?*

*As in real life, the most troubling problems the scientists face are ethical ones.*

## How to Find It

Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* was first published by Gollancz, London, January 1962. It's readily available second hand, in various editions and at various prices. It was recently reprinted by specialists in Scottish Writing Kennedy & Boyd. Here's a little more bibliographic information for that edition: Mitchison, Naomi, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, Kennedy & Boyd, Glasgow, UK, February 2011, pbk, 192 pages, ISBN-13: 978-1849210355.

*Memoirs of a Spacewoman* is discussed in Nic Clarke's long, insightful review of *Naomi Mitchison: Her Life and Work*, Conversation Pieces, Vol. 15, Lesley Hall, Aqueduct Press, 2008, which can be found at: [http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2008/06/an\\_experimental.shtml](http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2008/06/an_experimental.shtml)

And it's also discussed by Donna Haraway in *The Haraway Reader*, Routledge, NY, 2004, pp. 125-151; "Otherworldly Conversations; Terrain Topics; Local Terms."

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Gwyneth Jones, writer and critic of science fiction and fantasy, is the author of many novels for teenagers, mostly horror and thrillers, using the name Ann Halam, and several highly regarded sf novels for adults. Her essays and reviews are collected in *Deconstructing the Starships* (1999) and *Imagination/Space* (2009). Among other honors, several of her novels have been nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke, the latest being *Spirit* (2009). She lives in Brighton, UK, with her husband and son, some goldfish and two cats; practices yoga, and has done some extreme tourism in her time.





## The Master of Speculative Sex

*Paradise Tales* by Geoff Ryman,

Small Beer Press, July 12, 2011, 320 pp., \$16.00 trade paperback/\$9.95 DRM-free e-book.

Reviewed by Victoria Garcia

*Ryman's narrative structures are often nonlinear, but never obtrusively so; characters are complex and nuanced, but almost always sympathetic, or at least engaging...*

From the epic fantasy of *The Warrior Who Carried Life* to the hypertext slice-of-life of *253*, Geoff Ryman's novels have been both challenging and civilizing the world of fiction for over twenty years. Often unmistakably fantastic or sfnal in content, Ryman's books also exemplify some of the best characteristics of more mainstream or mimetic work. Ryman's narrative structures are often nonlinear, but never obtrusively so; characters are complex and nuanced, but almost always sympathetic, or at least engaging; and while his subject matter is frequently raw, the rawness is always handled with strength, finesse, and clarity.

In between publishing gorgeous, genre-shattering novels, Ryman has also produced a handful of shorter works. A quartet of the novella-length pieces were published together as *Unconquered Countries* in 1994. The current volume collects the balance of his others. With original publication dates that range from 1985 to 2009, this book offers a wonderful lens through which to view the progression of Ryman's craft.

The collection begins with the lightest and most fun tale in the lot, "The Filmmakers of Mars." In it we are shown a lavish cinematic interpretation of Edgar Rice Burroughs and introduced to a stork-jointed alien queen with a taste for old Hollywood glamour. Though thoroughly fanciful, the story could almost be considered a form of hard sf in which the technical heft comes from silent film history and early special effects engineering.

The next piece is the first of three set in Cambodia; a group that constitutes some of the most powerful material in the book. "The Last Ten Years in the Life of Hero Kai," a fable with Buddhist notes written in an understatedly epic tone, concerns a warrior who fights to free his people from the tyranny of magic and discovers the wages of both heroism and leadership. The other Cambodian stories include "Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter," which is also,

in essence, a fable, though it has more of a contemporary, urban feel. There, the unmourned dead speak through cell phones and laser printers, and the callow, brand-mad child of a deposed dictator earns redemption. The other Cambodian story, "Blocked," is also a lovely read.

The stories about digital identity, personhood, and culture are likewise strong on the whole. "Warmth" reads like a riff on "I Sing the Body Electric," though it seems to owe as much to the "wire mother" primate psychology experiments of Harry Harlow as it does to Bradbury. Though the ground it treads is not new, it offers fresh, thoughtful, and compelling insight. Also engaging is "V.A.O.," a cyber caper story in which the wily hackers are the disenfranchised residents of a nursing home. The best of the post-cyberpunk pieces, and arguably the best story in the collection, is "You." Here, the reader engages the story as viewer of the life-record of an archaeologist, who is viewing the life-record of her younger self, who is in turn viewing the life-record of an archaeologist who came before. Though that may sound unwieldy, Ryman handles this multiplexing with unobtrusive grace. As the story progresses, we are introduced to aliens with a new kind of language and a new kind of compound intelligence. By showing the reader these alien collective beings through a hybrid point of view, Ryman is able to give the reader a sense of both her own potential to be a participant in a collective mind and of her own incipient alienness. "You" is a perfectly glorious story.

Detectable false notes can be found in very few of the stories. The most jarring of these occurs in "Birth Days," a story published in 2003 and nominated for a number of awards including the Tiptree and the BSFWA award for best short story. The piece is set in a world in which homosexuality has been definitively shown to be the product of alien intervention; specifically the insertion of alien genes into the human genome. The protagonist, a gay molecular biologist with a brisk, conservative mother,





spends the story developing both medical cures for homosexuality and technology to facilitate male-male fertilization and male pregnancy. The characters are compelling; the story structure is elegant; and the alien intervention conceit provides an interesting frame for questions about identity, homophobia, and self-determination. Unfortunately, the parts of the story that are strong and satisfying are overshadowed by the absurdity of the story's underlying science, which involves, among other things, a series of pregnancies carried to term in the parent's bowel. I should note, however, that when not reviewing short story collections I am a graduate student, studying the genetics and cell biology of sperm. I may, therefore, be exactly the wrong audience for "Birth Days."

And though many of the story's fundamental conceits are beyond ridiculous, it's important to note that, in some ways, Ryman's speculation was absolutely on the money. In the *denouement*, Ryman postulates that human homosexuality persisted throughout millennia because when populations were in crisis, same-sex pairings

could become extraordinarily fecund. As of 2009, research has begun to show that at least some of the genes that appear to correspond to male homosexuality do produce increased fertility—in women. It is hypothesized that within families that carry the gene, the increase in offspring from females makes up for any reduction in the fertility of male conspecifics. This is exactly what Ryman suggested, but with no gastrointestinal childbearing required.

I should also note that, "Birth Days" aside, Ryman is a true master when it comes to speculative sex. This is demonstrated gorgeously in "Omnisexual," which is included in this collection. There we see ways a body can become truly alien, and the myriad wondrous ways that body and mind can form connections, respond to the world, and bear fruit. As both a reader of speculative fiction and as a fertility scientist, "Omnisexual" made me want to stand up and cheer.

I recommend this collection to both Ryman's existing fans and those new to his work. It is a beautiful and challenging treasure of a book.

*"Warmth" reads like a riff on "I Sing the Body Electric," though it seems to owe as much to the "wire mother" primate psychology experiments of Harry Harlow as it does to Bradbury.*

*As both a reader of speculative fiction and as a fertility scientist, "Omnisexual" made me want to stand up and cheer.*

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Victoria Elisabeth 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.

## Three Lessons by Shweta Narayan

### 1. Shed the whole skin.

Our simpler sisters know this: scrape  
 rub worry hurt  
 till every paper flake is gone  
 and you gleam whole. Don't get distracted;  
 Might as well hollow a gourd  
 for them, and string it  
 into a trap.

### 2. Burn it.

It can't be ripped fine enough, buried  
 deep enough, drowned so sodden  
 they cannot bake it dry. Only ash is safe. They know  
 too well how to piece together remake  
 preserve  
 their catches.  
 Their flutes are oiled  
 with musk, wound around  
 with careless sisters' skin.

3. If you see them, stuff your ears  
 and hide, silent. If they see you —  
 like hatchlings, their excited  
 babble, their eyes and gestures wide —  
 don't get distracted. Strike  
 before they set those wondering smiles  
 to bamboo flutes skin-wrapped, and sink  
 twilight notes into your loosening bones  
 to make you dance.

---

Shweta Narayan was born in India, and lived in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, The Netherlands, and Scotland before moving to California. She is a PhD student in linguistics. She loves folk tales and fairy tales, and writes poetry, prose poems, and short fiction. She received the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship for writers of color at Clarion 2007, was a Nebula finalist in 2011, and was guest co-editor of issue 4 of the poetry zine *Stone Telling*. She can be found online at <http://www.shwetanarayan.org>





## Our Bodies, Our Hair

*Blackberries and Redbones: Critical Articulations of Black Hair/Body Politics in Africana Communities*, edited by Regina Spellors and Kimberly Moffitt

Hampton Press, 484 pp., \$97.50 cloth/\$40.61 trade paper

Reviewed by Tanya C. DePass

*Rarely do I read a book and feel the urge to tell everyone I know to go get a copy, but Blackberries and Redbones is one of those books that I think everyone should read.*

Rarely do I read a book and feel the urge to tell everyone I know to go get a copy, but *Blackberries and Redbones* is one of those books that I think everyone should read. It's not merely a bunch of opinion pieces; it addresses the issues of black bodies and black hair politics with a critical eye. And it takes care to do so in a way that is accessible to people who have anything from a passing interest in these issues to those who have made them the topic of serious academic work. At first I was intimidated by the book, because I thought maybe I needed an advanced degree to tackle critical essays and such, but I was thankful to find this wasn't the case.

There's no topic that is left untouched in the book: colorism, our bodies, the experience of "loc'ing," aging as a black woman, dealing with our hair (our wonderful and apparently mystifying hair), being LGBTQ within our community, the issues and politics involved with whites adopting Africana hair stylings, all are addressed and dissected, and opened up for discussion through questions appearing at the end of every essay. Each essay touched me in a different way, either by how I related to the authors' experiences, or by showing me how they dealt in their lives with the issues on which the pieces they've penned concentrate.

The book contains too many essays to address individually here, but I want to address two from Section One. First, "Twisted: The Dreadlock Chronicles," by Bert Ashe, a professor at the University of Richmond. I was especially excited by how the author relates his hair journey from short, sharp cuts to finally sitting in the chair at the barber shop and feeling like his getting loc'd was meant to be. As someone in the midst of the loc'ing journey as well as someone who works in academia, I focused in on this essay like a hawk. Was Dr. Ashe's journey similar to mine? What had he gone through? Did his journey end in a

positive way, or was he met with resistance to his new locs?

I could identify with Dr. Ashe's longing for locs—I've wanted them for quite a while myself, but always thought that perhaps the time wasn't right or that they might not be well received in a professional environment. I was right there with him as his family and friends reacted to the change he had made.

What stuck with me was how people kept saying he looked more professorial with his locs. I've never assumed one had to have locs to fit in with one's academic peers. Perhaps if you were teaching African and Black Diaspora studies, then maybe I could see an expectation to look a certain way, but this idea that Dr. Ashe somehow seemed more professorial based on having locs stumped me. I hope to read a follow-up to this essay to see if he kept the locs, or if he discovered that having them wasn't what he thought it would be.

Second, I want to touch on "Pretty Color 'n Good Hair: Creole Women of New Orleans and the Politics of Identity," by Yaba Amgborale Blay. Based on interviews conducted prior to Hurricane Katrina, Ms. Blay's essay looks into colorism, aka being "color struck" within our community, specifically in regard to the heritage of Creole culture. Being someone who is fairly light-skinned and partially of Creole heritage, I was drawn into the stories told by Ma'Deeya and her two daughters, Inka Book and Red. Their words took me back to tales told by my grandmother, who could have easily passed for white and was often mistaken as such.

As I read it became apparent that colorism was going on within the essay itself, in Ma'Deeya's frequent references to the skin tone of the researcher and the assessment that she could have never advanced in Creole society. I often wondered what the author's skin tone had to be for the elder of the family she was interviewing to keep remarking on it. This question almost distracted me from the tales of quadroon and octoroon balls, where fair-skinned black women as well as mixed-race women were trotted out in front of European American suitors. I was appalled to learn that these balls were a way to keep the Creole race as fair as possible and to maintain a separate identity from their darker brethren.

*Each essay touched me in a different way, either by how I related to the authors' experiences, or by showing me how they dealt in their lives with the issues on which the pieces they've penned concentrate.*



As someone who comes from Creoles I shouldn't be too surprised, nor as someone aware of my history as a black woman in this country, but it still bothers me to see how sanguine Ma'Deeya comes across when talking about discrimination against other blacks across three generations. I give Ms. Blay lots of credit for keeping her cool as her color is brought into interviews again and again, the elder of the family often saying that within the Creole community the essay's author could not have gotten a man. Towards the end of the essay, Ms. Blay reveals that she is of Ghanaian descent, and has a relatively dark complexion. She writes about how that factored into how forthcoming the family's matriarch was with her during the interviews on which the essay is based. In response to direct questions about her attitude Ma'Deeya claims it's not rude, but her daughters give Ms. Blay the truth once their mother is out of earshot, fill-

ing the author in on just how color struck Ma'Deeya is; they point out that she even neglected to display one of her grandchildren's photos because he was dark. This essay really hit home for me, and I doubt any person of color who reads it will be left untouched.

All of the essays in the book are informative, well-written, and thought-provoking. I think that anyone can get something from them, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or level of interest in the topics presented. I leave you with the recommendation that non people of color, especially, ought to read this book, so that they can get a small idea what it's like for people of color to deal with these issues every day, all day. I can't recommend *Blackberries and Redbones* enough as a textbook for anyone teaching gender studies, women's studies, or African Diaspora studies, because it will keep you and your classes talking about these issues long after you've read it.

*All of the essays in the book are informative, well-written, and thought-provoking. I think that anyone can get something from them, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or level of interest in the topics presented.*

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Tanya C. DePass is a 37-year-old sci-fi fan who was raised on a diet of original series *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and written sci-fi as soon as she was old enough to hold a book on her own. She's a lifelong Chicagoan and is mum to one grey-and-black tabby, and will eventually grow up, whatever that means.



## Peace Comes in Every Box

*This Shared Dream* by Kathleen Ann Goonan

Tor, July 2011, 368 pp., \$25.99

Reviewed by Deb Taber

Science fiction at its best reveals new perspectives on humanity and entices the reader to think about what these new angles might mean in the real world. Kathleen Ann Goonan's *This Shared Dream* succeeds in this endeavor, making for a valuable—if occasionally uncomfortable—read.

The story follows various branches of the Dance family through different time streams, which are created as the characters try to bring the world to peace through nanotechnology and biochemistry, aided by the ever-evolving Handtz Device. The Device's creator believes that a combination of increased neural plasticity, education, and archetypally feminine guiding principles can activate altruism in humanity, bringing an end to war and ushering in the transition to a mature, healthy human race.

The problem with this theory is that bringing it into practice requires much trial and error, and the errors can be egregious, changing both the past and present.

The Handtz Device not only opens human neural pathways; it also splits the pathways between potential worlds and accesses a nonlinear approach to time and memory. Jill Dance discovers this at age 17, when she travels back in time and prevents the Kennedy assassination, only to find herself in a new world—one in which her mother has gone missing and her brother and sister remember nothing of their previous lives.

Intertwined with all of this is a tale of international espionage dating back to World War II. There are those who want the Device to enforce their own vision of a better world. While they don't understand the true nature of the device, they know the Dance family has it. The book's combination of feminine intelligence and action puts the makers of the modern spate of female-fronted spy thriller movies to shame.

The strength of *This Shared Dream* is its ideas. Not only does the book present an interwoven set of approaches to

*The book's combination of feminine intelligence and action puts the makers of the modern spate of female-fronted spy thriller movies to shame.*

Cont. on p. 13





## Complicated Freedoms

*Isles of the Forsaken* by Carolyn Ives Gilman

ChiZine Press, July 2011, 312 pp., \$15.95

Reviewed by Nic Clarke

*A secondary-world fantasy novel that isn't set in pseudo-medieval Europe is a rare treat.... A secondary-world fantasy novel that engages with gender and colonialism in a nuanced, intersectional, and entertaining way is even rarer.*

*Isles of the Forsaken* is a refreshing read. A secondary-world fantasy novel that isn't set in pseudo-medieval Europe is a rare treat, if less unusual than it used to be. A secondary-world fantasy novel that engages with gender and colonialism in a nuanced, intersectional, and entertaining way is even rarer.

Hemmed in by the expectations of an over-achieving family, idealistic Nathaway Talley flakes out of law school and heads for the so-called Forsaken Islands, in order to Make A Difference. His role, as he sees it, is to mediate between the locals and the Inning Empire, smoothing the Islanders' path from "poverty and ignorance" and "the most horrible superstitions" to the civilized liberty of Inning rule. This will, he imagines, bring him personal fulfillment and the Islanders' gratitude.

That none of this goes as planned probably won't come as a surprise. What I appreciated about *Isles*, though, is that it goes wrong in such interesting ways. This is not (just) Nathaway's story; his voice is only one of many that are heard during the novel, and most of the others belong to Islanders. Gilman quickly goes beyond the surface tale of smug, cackling imperialists ranged against wan, noble, and above all silent native victims. She probes the capacity of individuals on both sides for imagination and generosity, exploitation and cruelty, without losing sight of the power differential in relations between colonizers and colonized.

The Islanders themselves are riven by an ethnic and cultural divide, between the stocky, rural-dwelling Adaina and the fairer-skinned, urbanized Torna. The Torna, having played nicely with their new Inning overlords, have a privileged status among the conquered peoples and the lion's share of political and economic power; the warrior Adaina have been forced onto marginal lands, and resent the Torna as collaborators. Even as they play the two communities off against each other, the Innings we meet are disdainful of these "primitive" conflicts. "Race hatred is refreshingly primal to a per-

son accustomed to the complexities of the Court," says one, right before complaining that the Admiral's policy of integrating the Inning and the Native wings of the Navy means the end of all that is decent and ordered in the world.

The man to whom this comment is delivered is Joffrey, one of several Islander characters who have made careers within the colonial establishment, and whose stories bring out the contradictions and difficulties of embracing "progress," when progress means subordination. As a Torna naval officer, Joffrey is both insider and outsider, and during the novel he comes to realize the fragility of that position. Lacking the dubious cushion of being a model minority, Harg, the largely unsung Adaina hero of the Innings' last war, feels both inequality and threat more keenly; unchecked imperial domination, he knows, means strip-mined Islands and "children withered young by Inning contempt."

The character who most embodies the novel's keynotes of clashing freedoms and intersecting oppressions is Spaeth, a Lashnura—someone capable of healing others with her blood—on the island of Yora. Although she has the appearance of an adult woman, Spaeth was magically "created for enjoyment and delight" seven years before, by her Lashnura lover Goth. Their relationship is, frankly, disturbing given its clear imbalance of power, although we see very little of it directly, Goth being elsewhere for much of the novel. Gilman works hard—if not wholly successfully—to problematize the dynamic of manipulative, controlling father figure and naïve, impressionable young woman. She explores how Lashnurai power gives them a vibrant, urgent connection with their physicality and sexuality. It makes for an interesting magic system with a real overtone of danger.

It is also a magic that carries highly restrictive obligations to land and community, and Spaeth is positioned as a potential victim on this axis, too. Healing creates an emotional and spiritual bond between healer and healed that is both exhilarating and confining for a Lashnurai. Spaeth's reluctance to give up her autonomy to this role is movingly portrayed, and the Yorans' claims on Goth—and on her as his successor—are painted as predatory as well as understandably desperate. Again, Gilman

*Gilman...probes the capacity of individuals on both sides for imagination and generosity, exploitation and cruelty, without losing sight of the power differential in relations between colonizers and colonized.*



complicates matters; representative-of-civilization Nathaway's avowed intent to save the beautiful, helpless maiden from horrible superstition is shown to be both (paternalistically) well-meaning, and every bit as much of a threat to her self-determination as the community's demands; and Inning women, as we glimpse through Nathaway's sister Rachel, are differently, rather than less, constrained.

Inning or Adaina, Spaeth is surrounded by people convinced that they know what is best for her—meaning, of course, for themselves. Pleasingly, the narrative tension in Spaeth's story is not whether she will be rescued from her fate, but the terms on which she will make her choice—and her growing awareness of the fact that no choice can be completely free. Here lies the central clash of perspective between Inning and Islander. The Empire is a "lexarchy," a state ruled by impersonal, impar-

tial laws rather than fallible human beings. Its proponents assume that law alone can create a just society: it is, as the Admiral says, "a gift which frees men to be responsible for their own actions."

But this ignores the cultural knowledge required to operate effectively within Inning law, as Nathaway discovers to his confusion and chagrin when attempting to stage a trial on Yora. The playing-field is not level—and people are not blank slates, whose position in life is determined entirely by their own efforts. As Goth explains, this is why healing is central to the Island way of life:

"[I]n life, a person accumulates pain in his or her soul. Every harm we have suffered is still with us in some way. The scars make us stiff and unsupple; they cut off ways of moving and acting that we might otherwise be capable of.... The unhealed are susceptible to hatred and unreason; they are not truly free."

*[T]he narrative tension in Spaeth's story is not whether she will be rescued from her fate, but the terms on which she will make her choice—and her growing awareness of the fact that no choice can be completely free.*

Nic Clarke lives in Oxford, UK, where she researches and teaches medieval Islamic history. A revised version of her doctoral thesis, "The Muslim Conquest of Iberia: Medieval Arabic Narratives," will be published by Routledge in 2012. She also reviews fiction for *Strange Horizons*, *SFX*, and *Vector*, and blogs at Eve's Alexandria.

## The Shared Dream

(cont. from p. 11)

time, memory, and the concept of a better world, but the way Goonan presents those ideas reinforces their emergence in the story. She doesn't let the reader in on the secret all at once, but rather drops hints of the Device's iterations and potential like sparks of neurons firing in the pages, leaving the reader to connect the neural pathways together. This approach falters occasionally in the first third of the book, where sometimes the ideas and character progressions are at odds. These instances result in almost a call-and-response relationship between the ideas of the story and the story itself. This soon straightens out into a smooth—though justifiably nonlinear—progression wherein the ideas are enveloped by the unfolding lives of the characters, much as the several iterations of the Handtz Device wrap themselves in intriguing toys, learning tools, and seemingly innocuous items.

Reading *This Shared Dream* requires some trust on the reader's part, as Goonan leaves much of the technology unexplained until well into the book, giving the Handtz Device's effects more of a fantasy than science fiction feel until its technol-

ogy is revealed. This is not false suspense, however; it is near-meta storytelling that places the reader in the characters' situation, letting the story grow much as shared memories and neural pathways grow in the characters.

The book truly shines in a sharp, witty scene where Bette Dance, spy and mother, encourages the head of the General Mills Company to include Handtz-augmented toys in their cereal boxes. This single scene encapsulates many of the prejudices the characters are working against and our own world's equivalents, as well as the effectiveness of the Device as it matures.

The child characters also merit positive mention, illustrating Goonan's point that neural plasticity in children, when properly attended early on, provides the potential for cultivating a better human nature. The way the book's children interact with features of their devices, using them to aid other children in distress, draws attention to the modern use of tablet computers and their potential benefits in classrooms. These real-world devices succeed in cultivating an interest in education and self-improvement in youth around the world

*Reading This Shared Dream requires some trust on the reader's part,... it is near-meta storytelling that places the reader in the characters' situation, letting the story grow much as shared memories and neural pathways grow in the characters.*

Cont. on p. 15





## Beautiful Recovery

*Redwood and Wildfire* by Andrea Hairston

Aqueduct Press; February 28, 2011; 448 pp.; \$20.00

Reviewed by Maria I. Velazquez

*This nuanced and exuberant exploration of American identity is set immediately before and during the Great Migration, when many black Southerners fled the racism of the American South, ... only to discover the racism, poverty, and tenements of northern cities like Chicago.*

*Redwood and Wildfire* centers on love, the hoodoo of the blues, and survival. This nuanced and exuberant exploration of American identity is set immediately before and during the Great Migration, when many black Southerners fled the racism of the American South, sharecropping, and lynch mobs only to discover the racism, poverty, and tenements of northern cities like Chicago. This history drives a story of parental legacies, familial ghosts, and self-recovery.

In 1898 in Peach Grove, Georgia, a white lynch mob murders Garnett Phipps, a black conjure woman who shot the white man who tried to rape her. The night of her death, Garnett sends her family, including her daughter, Redwood, on a journey through time and swamp so that they can escape that same fate. Aidan Cooper, an Irish-Seminole teenager, sees the mob in action but is unable to stop them. Instead, after Garnett has died he cuts her body down and lays her to rest in a church, so that her family will be able to properly mourn her passing. Garnett's death haunts both Aidan and her surviving children, particularly Redwood, similar to her mother in looks and talent. As Redwood grows into a beauty, a conjure woman, and a fiercely independent intellectual, the same forces that killed the mother begin to coalesce around the daughter. These forces threaten both her life and her nascent relationship with Aidan, one of the few people in Peach Grove who fully believes in Redwood's magical prowess.

When Redwood kills a white man intent on raping her, she flees north in order to escape a new lynch mob. Because of her rape and her rapist's death, Redwood no longer trusts her own hoodoo; she has lost the belief and trust necessary to perform truly powerful magic. Aidan, her friend and confidante, covers for the killing for several years, remaining in Peach Grove until he too is forced to make the journey to Chicago.

While Redwood and Aidan's love is central to *Redwood and Wildfire*, this is not the kind of love story where people get rescued. Like a blues singer, Hairston refuses to "make hurting pretty." When the nephew of the man who attempted to rape her mother successfully rapes Redwood, the scene is visceral, powerful, and honest. Redwood's complicated emotional response to both her rape and its effects (including her rapist's death) reverberate throughout the text, highlighting that part of what Hairston is arguing for in *Redwood and Wildfire* is the radical utility of grief as a component of nation-building and emotional recovery. The cycle of blues and its explicit lyrical connections to grief, trauma, healing, and the physical becomes a metonym for American history, conquest, and slavery. Hairston suggests that the only way *out* of this historical trauma is *through*. Love can be redemptive, but only when coupled with a sustained engagement with the past through storytelling: national, regional, and personal.

What is especially interesting about Hairston's argument is that she explicitly links this personal and emotional recovery to the history of technology and performance. Upon her escape from Peach Grove, Redwood's passion becomes acting, singing, and performing. Because she is bitter about the roles she is offered as a black woman and has a commitment to telling stories where black and brown people can be heroes, Redwood begins fundraising to create a movie featuring black and brown actors in prominent roles. This project grows to incorporate Redwood's ghosts, the Christian influence of Chicago's black club women, the loa Erzulie, pirates, and Redwood's own rebirth. Throughout, Hairston places an emphasis on the technologies of stories and self-narration: journaling, oral histories, fables, songs, vaudeville, film, and the work of writing fiction.

Hairston challenges the reader to consider recovery from trauma as a process and as a journey, not as a destination or

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*The cycle of blues and its explicit lyrical connections to grief, trauma, healing, and the physical becomes a metonym for American history, conquest, and slavery. ... Love can be redemptive, but only when coupled with a sustained engagement with the past through storytelling: national, regional, and personal.*



a goal. As Redwood rises to prominence in the Chicago arts scene and starts seeing success in her fundraising for her film project, her relationships with her brother and Aidan becomes unstable. It is only through completing the film, releasing her mother's unquiet spirit, and directly challenging the boneyard baron's sovereignty over black lives that Redwood is able to free herself from the ghosts of her rape and her rapist. Redwood has to reconcile her multiple selves before she can reconcile with her brother and his anger or Aidan and his guilt.

Hairston also challenges the reader to think about multiple types of trauma. While Aidan is not Garnett's child, she haunts him as well, enjoining him to "do right" by loving her family as his own and remembering the names and faces of the men who caused her death. His storyline is not precisely one of forgiveness—at

least, not one where he needs to ask Garnett or Redwood for it. While he watched the lynch mob murder Garnett and was able to identify several of its members, the person who truly blames him for not intervening is Aidan himself. He is called to be a witness both to histories of murder and triumphant talks of survival. The stories he shares with Redwood combine Irish mythologies, including a brief excerpt from "Song of Amergin," a paean to the goddess-protector of Ireland composed by a druid; the Native legends of Okefenokee swamp; the American stories of Irish immigrants; and the histories of the forced removal of Native peoples from Georgia lands. These stories intertwine with Redwood's Gullah past to create a narrative that relishes its own fragments, allusions, and half-memories as evidence of ancestral legacies and survival.

*Hairston challenges the reader to consider recovery from trauma as a process and as a journey, not as a destination or a goal.*

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Maria Velazquez is a doctoral student at the University of Maryland, College Park. She serves on the board of Lifting Voices, a District of Columbia-based nonprofit that helps young people in DC discover the power of creative writing. She blogs for *The Hathor Legacy* ([www.thehathorlegacy.com](http://www.thehathorlegacy.com)), a feminist pop culture blog. Her dissertation project examines the use of the body as a component in community building, paying particular attention to the Bellydancers of Color Association, the anti-racist blogosphere, and Red Light Center, an adults-only virtual world. Maria is also a Ron Brown Scholar and an alumna of Smith College.

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## The Shared Dream

(cont. from p. 13)

when they're made accessible, particularly in inner cities and third world environments where this sort of technology and accessibility were formerly lacking. The children's side of the story also clearly illustrates where our modern devices fail, presenting a far more advanced alternative that empowers children to make positive changes in an increasingly unified world.

The presentation of some of the ideas in *This Shared Dream* lacks subtlety: World War II and the Kennedy assassination are prime turning points for worldwide peace, but Goonan doesn't pay much attention to other significant events, particularly those without connections to the US. Also, the book occasionally suffers from dropping into almost a love letter to Montessori education. These weaknesses may make the book appear less complex to a casual reader, but its subtlety and strength lie underneath the action and situations. The many time streams or worlds that spin off from the device underscore how easily and often good intentions can bring about a different mix of good and ill, yet Goonan avoids falling into the storytelling trap of mak-

ing these offshoots simplistic examples of world-gone-completely-wrong.

What gives the book its ultimate power are the major questions it leaves unanswered for the reader: if creating an altruistic, warless world is possible, is it ethical to force that world upon those who resist it? In the end, if we have qualms about its ethics, is that reason enough to hold back from bringing on a better world? And behind it all, is an Orwellian Big Brotheresque device acceptable if its intentions are good? One character answers these questions for herself, but readers and the remaining characters are left to ponder them long after the story ends.

*What gives the book its ultimate power are the major questions it leaves unanswered for the reader: if creating an altruistic, warless world is possible, is it ethical to force that world upon those who resist it?*

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Deb Taber writes, edits, and performs slave duties for two and a half Siamese cats. Sometimes she haunts the Pacific Northwest; other times, she does not. She is the senior book editor for Apex Publishing, an award-winning small press specializing in dark speculative fiction. Her stories have appeared in *Fantasy Magazine* and various anthologies. Visit her online at [www.inkfuscate.com](http://www.inkfuscate.com) to learn more.





*Fairy Tales in Electri-City* by Francesca Lia Block

A Midsummer Night's Press, March 2011, 78 pp., \$13.95

Reviewed by Jennifer Stevenson

*Block's lovers come as elves, as centaurs, as satyrs, giants, vampires, zombies, witches, and warlocks. The fairies seem to be friends and advisors.... the species count does get dazzling.*

There are two schools of journalism, I was told as a child: the "gee whiz" school and the "aw shit" school. Those who write about love and magic tend also to fall into these two schools, although not both at once, and generally they like to finish on a down note. "Aw shit" is more sophisticated, and it gets you invited to read in coffeehouses.

Francesca Lia Block's *Fairy Tales in Electri-City* mocks fairies and takes them seriously, assigns animal heads to old lovers and new lovers, accuses and thanks, despairs and hopes. In that order. Thank goodness! I never had much patience for the young turks in black leather, their prominent Adam's apples working as they drone about gas works and love failing in the gutter.

Block's lovers come as elves, as centaurs, as satyrs, giants, vampires, zombies, witches, and warlocks. The fairies seem to be friends and advisors. I'm an experienced bird watcher, but the species count does get dazzling. Block also writes here about incest, the emotional kind anyway, with a light touch that sidesteps Plath's grotty bodily fluids, or the bald rage of Sharon Olds.

On the fairy waterslides of these poems, the reader rides a seamless continuum from childhood wonder to the explosive, possessed, and possessive miracles a child experiences in incest; to the reiterative plunges into disappointment, rejection, and grisly self-transformation of the loves she finds in adulthood; and finally, to smooth passage into mature love, to a hero a woman can believe in. It all happens to one person, not to some robot or monster chopped up, reassembled, critiqued, redesigned, renamed, wandering in pieces and bereft. This woman befriended by fairies is whole.

There's lots of mordant humor, yes, rescuing the poems from the "gee whiz" cutes. But their tone is far from dark. I'll only mention three individually, briefly.

In "Tin" the speaker finds and loses her love twice, in magical guises:

*and after many days and many nights  
the one i had not recognized before  
came to my door*

Reunion is a recurrent theme in these poems, an optimistic one. Optimism, in fact, makes this collection remarkable. Even "The Vampire" takes a turn for the better:

*but a strange thing happened  
the vampire no longer felt empty  
he no longer felt thirsty*

and ends:

*and together they stepped  
into the dark and polished private  
stone garden  
of merciful memory*

In "Bear and Deer," a bear finds his father dead in a cave:

*A red tailed hawk circled above his head  
the bear recognized his father's spirit  
for he had learned  
that not to believe in such things  
makes life a cave  
without an opening  
to spring*

Accustomed as I am to poetry about breast cancer, men murdering prostitutes with shotguns, and the deaths of children presented with the grittiest realism, I was blinded by the optimism, even the certainty of good news in these poems. Block salts her fairies with plenty of snark, but reading them, I actually came to trust her. She was going to get me home safe. You don't get that much, these days.

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the optimism, even the  
certainty of good news in  
these poems.*

*There's lots of mordant humor, yes, rescuing the poems from the "gee whiz" cutes. But their tone is far from dark.*

Jennifer Stevenson is the author of *Trash Sex Magic*. She lives in Chicago.







## Updated Asteroids

*Up Against It* by M.J. Locke, Tor Books, 400 pp., \$25.99

Reviewed by Karen Burnham

I found *Up Against It*, a “debut” sf novel by Laura Mixon writing as M. J. Locke, too easy to put down. It has many promising elements, but they rarely cohere into a compelling story. I was all too able to stop reading the book and nitpick it, and I often got tossed out of the story by off-notes. While there is plenty to praise, I feel that this book isn’t going to stand out as one of the impressive novels of 2011.

*Up Against It* is firmly rooted in core genre traditions, with some updates to give it a contemporary feel. On the traditional side we have the asteroid cluster setting, where miners look for useful metals and researchers grow fantastical botanical gardens. There is a traditional government hierarchy, and a traditional existential threat: the colony’s last ice shipment from the Kuiper Belt (used to give the colony water and air) has been sabotaged, and Cold Equations-style, orbital dynamics says that the only available ice belongs to the Martian Mafia.

On the contemporary side, we have total media ubiquity: cameras have been miniaturized and are omnipresent. Some beam content back to Earth for use in a future-equivalent reality TV show (for which rights the colony is handsomely paid), and others allow the colonists to constantly rate each other with positive or negative “sammies.” (Locke acknowledges her debt to Cory Doctorow’s “Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom” whuffies.) You’ve also got a group of people who self-bio-modify into exotic and sometimes genderless forms, a cast of characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds (without their cultural diversity being whitewashed out), and a background wherein gay marriage and polyamory are unremarkable, even though most of the foregrounded relationships are safely heterosexual binary pairings. Plus, there’s a rogue AI that spontaneously forms in the life support system during the crisis, and the computer experts learn to speak to it using a musical interface.

Despite all this, I found both the plot and the world-building somewhat thin, and I suspect that the root cause of both problems is the pacing. I repeatedly found myself distracted by trivial details to which I would never give a second thought had the book really grabbed me. For example: One character tells another to communicate on the 6.5 nm wavelength. 6.5 nanometers is in the UV/X-Ray portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. Any flimsy material would block it; it’s a horrible choice for a communications frequency. And going deeper: what are the economics that allowed the asteroid cluster to be inhabited in the first place? What advances in rocketry or energy make such a thing profitable in this future when it obviously isn’t now? Given the way our current manned exploration of the solar system has completely stalled out, it’s a bit hard to take a “humanity mining the asteroids” future for granted any more.

Turning to the characters, I notice that the book carries with it a blurb from Cory Doctorow, and I can see how it would appeal to him: adolescent Geoff and his friends do some hacking with nanoassemblers and are generally resourceful individuals who are sometimes more effective than the government forces—exactly the sort of protagonists that Doctorow features in books like *Little Brother*. However, it becomes evident throughout the book that, a) the hand of the author features heavily in maneuvering the kids to be at the center of one action-based set piece after another; and b) without the constant assistance of tough-yet-understanding lifetime government/military guy Sean, the kids would all be dead several times over.

Then there’s Jane, the resource commissioner. This is the sort of character that I usually really identify with: a woman who’s worked hard to achieve her position, is good at her job, and also has a real and solid marriage. At least, that’s the sort of character we’re introduced to. However, as the crisis unfolds, Jane often acts in ways

*It has many promising elements, but they rarely cohere into a compelling story.*

*[A] cast of characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds (without their cultural diversity being whitewashed out), and a background wherein gay marriage and polyamory are unremarkable, even though most of the foregrounded relationships are safely heterosexual binary pairings.*

*Cont. on p. 19*





## Slim, Essential, Subtle

*Thief of Lives* by Lucy Sussex

Twelfth Planet Press, 2011, 102 pp., Aus \$18 plus postage

Reviewed by Cynthia Ward

*Thief of Lives is a good choice if you want to read a skilled feminist writer working in multiple genres. And if you're a Sussex fan, you already know that like all her work, it's essential.*

The names of important American writers of feminist speculative fiction, like Octavia E. Butler, Joanna Russ, Suzy McKee Charnas, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Vonda N. McIntyre, are generally known to U.S. science fiction and fantasy fans. The names of important Australian feminist sf writers, like Sylvia Kelso, Justine Larbalestier, Rosaleen Love, and the latest recipient of Australia's Peter McNamara Achievement Award for science fiction professionals, Lucy Sussex? Not so much. Sussex would have left an indelible mark on feminist speculative fiction solely for "My Lady Tongue," her delightful dystopian lesbian Shakespearean story, which received Australia's Ditmar Award in 1989. But, with Judith Raphael Buckrich, she also co-edited a central text, *She's Fantastical: The First Anthology of Australian Women's Speculative Fiction, Magic Realism, and Fantasy* (Sybilla, 1995).

You wouldn't guess Sussex's importance to feminist sf by the opening story (and sole reprint) in her new collection, *Thief of Lives*. It's good feminist fiction. But Ned Kelly Award finalist "The Fountain of Justice" is crime fiction.

As the story opens, a well-known crook may go to prison for a crime he didn't commit. Not that the drug-lord's a client of lawyer Meg. She serves folks like Jen, who wants to drop charges against the boyfriend who put her in the Spinal Injuries Ward, and Jen's juvie son, Petey, whose activities may have framed the drug-lord. A critique of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's assertion that coincidence has no place in crime fiction, "The Fountain of Justice" may confuse readers as it returns to its frame story. But its ending presents all the necessary dots for the reader to connect.

The next story, "Alchemy," is undeniably speculative fiction. Bored demon Azubel enjoys tasting mortal minds, and he's never tasted one quite like a young Babylonian perfumier's. Azubel can see possible futures; and he sees that Tapputi may be the

mother of chemistry. What more might she become, if they have a meeting of minds?

Tapputi rejects his offer of alliance so abruptly that many readers won't buy it, given the cool, flexible intelligence she has displayed to this point. Sussex's spare prose style, generally strong, works against the story here; Tapputi's thoughts and background aren't developed enough to make her panicked reaction convincing. However, Tapputi's sharp mind and Azubel's ambivalent attention hold readers through to Sussex's affecting conclusion.

Up next is the quotidian slice-of-life tale, "The Subject of O," in which college student Petra wonders what the big deal is about orgasms. When she becomes uncomfortable about the dildo perched on a gal-pal's mantel, you might suppose the story's heading straight (as it were) into lesbian-awakening territory, with perhaps a disappointing detour to the sexist B&D suggested by the titular allusion to "The Story of O," and perhaps an extended visit to Petra's sexually abused childhood. But Sussex is far too subtle a writer to take those obvious turns, presenting us with an ending that rejects misogynistic bullshit and celebrates a straight woman's sexual awakening.

*Thief of Lives's* fourth and final entry gives the collection its name. The novelette also gives the current image of urban fantasy—chick with attitude and a hot vampire/werewolf/fae boyfriend—something of a radical makeover. Competent instead of smart-mouthed, and a lot scarier for that, Ally is the bodyguard of a badly damaged U.S. woman writer, and a sexually ambiguous vampire whose pursuits are quite other than romance or sex. The slow revelation of Ally's and her prey's true natures, and her true reasons for visiting the U.K., make "Thief of Lives" a rare pleasure—one increased by repeat readings.

Lucy Sussex's trim and excellent new collection, *Thief of Lives*, isn't the place to start if you want an introduction to her key feminist speculative fiction (that would

*Thief of Lives's fourth and final entry gives the collection its name. The novelette also gives the current image of urban fantasy—chick with attitude and a hot vampire/werewolf/fae boyfriend—something of a radical makeover.*



probably be *Matilda Told Such Dreadful Lies: The Essential Lucy Sussex*, forthcoming from Ticonderoga Press). However, *Thief of Lives* is a good choice if you want to read a skilled feminist writer working in multiple genres. And if you're a Sussex fan, you already know that like all her work, it's essential.

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

## Updated Asteroids

(cont. from p. 17)

that struck me as flaky or immature. Her warnings about the Martian Mob seem shrill rather than urgent, and I never totally bought into the idea that they were an existential threat. Jane warns that the Mob engineered the initial catastrophe and timed it so that they would be the only ones with available ice. That I can believe. However, Jane is sure that they will then move in, subdue the populace with armed mercenaries, and assassinate most of the leadership in a series of coups—we are told this happened to another asteroid cluster. Somehow they are supposed to do all of this to a colony that is under 24/7 surveillance as part of a popular solar-system-wide TV show. Jane's insistence on this point seemed paranoid to me, and I had no problem understanding the other characters that didn't take her seriously. It was difficult for me to do so as well.

In the end, there were parts of this book that I wanted to like, but too many other parts that either undermined my suspension of disbelief, or simply failed to convince. I often found my attention drifting, which is the only reason I'd notice or care about something so trivial as a poorly selected communication frequency. When a book really has me hooked, I'll happily overlook minor slips such as that. The YA protagonists and whiz-bang set-piece fights might have more impact on a younger audience, but the lack of focus in between undermines whatever momentum the narrative generates. I'll be waiting a bit longer for a book that really updates the classic exciting asteroid belt adventure tale with the new modern genre tropes.

*In the end, there were parts of this book that I wanted to like, but too many other parts that either undermined my suspension of disbelief, or simply failed to convince.*

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Karen Burnham is vocationally an engineer and avocationally a fiction reviewer. She works at NASA Johnson Space Center as an electrical engineer. For the past few years she has reviewed science fiction and fantasy for venues such as *Strange Horizons*, *SFSignal*, and *Salon Futura*. She edits *Locus* magazine's Roundtable Blog.



# Change the World

(cont. from p. 4)

Did the panel  
change the world?  
Yes, a little

exercising legitimate leadership, and she has to save the world herself. As do we all.

It was an exciting panel. Along with talking about our favorite books, we touched on the connections between social movements and literature, as well as the ways books had influenced our politics. Did the panel change the world? Yes, a little; in any case, it made it outside of the anarchist book fair and into a wider discussion of science fiction and anarchism. Blogger Shel Graves posted our book list, along with some of the panelists' recommendations, to the Northwest Science Fiction Society News blog (<http://nwsfnews.blogspot.com>) in the article "I Wanna Read SF Anarchy."

Graves' article drew a couple of silly comments about our omission of "anarcho-capitalist stuff"—works by Robert Heinlein, Vernor Vinge, and Neal Stephenson. Now, I'm quite sure this term makes sense in the minds of the people who use it, but I don't think they're using the standard definitions of either the words "anarchism" or "capitalist." I can't make any sense out of "anti-authoritarian proponent of rich folks having power over other people due to their control over vast political, social and economic resources, plus a private army to help guard said control." That's an example of what happens if you skip praxis and go straight to the pure theory. But it's not just silly, it's *the wrong dream*.

Bruce Sterling also complained about the list in a blog post on Wired.com, "I Wanna Be Sci-Fi Anarcheee." He wrote:

That's an interesting list, but it's pretty much green feminist Ecotopian West Coastie anarchist sci-fi. I don't see much in there that would keep Nestor Makhno happy; why, there's hardly even one single fat bourgeois strung up by the heels and machine-gunned.

I can't tell whether this is meant to be taken as tongue-in-cheek or is pure and simple mockery. Does Sterling really think that Makhno's military exploits define anarchism—or even Makhno, for that matter? Or that all the feminists in our reading list are pacifists? Or that the Pa-

cific Northwest Free Zone is anything like Ecotopia? Still, it was gratifying to see a major science fiction author take note of the list and send it out to Wired.com. It shows that when we do little things like this panel, we're changing the canon, pushing the boundaries of what we dare to dream.

And that matters, because powerful, world-changing dreams do exist, and people have implemented them in the past, or are implementing them right now in the present. You've probably heard of the Zapatistas. But did you know that *Don Quixote* accompanied Marx and Bakunin into Cuba and Florida by way of cigar factories?<sup>1</sup> Do you know anything about the Free Women of Spain?<sup>2</sup> Or the Horizontalidad movement in Argentina?<sup>3</sup> Check them out. You might find they make for good stories—stories that we need.

So move over, Heinlein. Science fiction—like feminism, like anarchism—is moving on.

## Endnotes

1. "Lost and Found Sound: Cigar Stories." Narr. Andy Garcia. All Things Considered. NPR. 14 May, 1999. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1050062>>
2. Ackelsberg, Martha A. Free Women of Spain. Anarchism and the struggle for the emancipation of women. AK Press, 2005. <<http://www.akpress.org/2004/items/freewomenofspain>>
3. Ed. Marina Sitrin. Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina. AK Press, 2006. <<http://www.akpress.org/2006/items/horizontalism>>

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Kristin King is a writer, parent, and activist who lives in Seattle. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Calyx*, *The Pushcart Prize XXII* (1998), and other places. She enjoys reading, her family, reading, Doctor Who, and more reading.

[W]hen we do little things like this panel, we're changing the canon, pushing the boundaries of what we dare to dream.

And that matters, because powerful, world-changing dreams do exist



## Some Science Fiction/Fantasy Works of Interest to Anarchists

Discussed at the Seattle Anarchist Bookfair

October 18, 2009

- Zainab Amadahy — *The Moons of Palmares*
- M.T. Anderson — *Feed*
- Iain M. Banks — *Consider Phlebas, The Player of Games, Use of Weapons*
- Octavia Butler — *Parable of the Sower, Parable of the Talents, Lilith's Brood*
- Samuel R. Delany — *Dhalgren, Triton, Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*
- Cory Doctorow — *Little Brother, Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*
- L. Timmel Duchamp — *Alanya to Alanya, Renegade, Tsunami, Blood in the Fruit, Stretto*
- Harlan Ellison — "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman"
- William Gibson — *Idoru*
- Eileen Gunn — *Stable Strategies and Others*
- Sarah Hall — *The Carhullan Army*
- Cecelia Holland — *Floating Worlds*
- Nalo Hopkinson — *Midnight Robber, So Long Been Dreaming*
- Aldous Huxley — *Brave New World*
- Ursula K. Le Guin — *The Dispossessed, Always Coming Home, Four Ways to Forgiveness*
- Saab Lofton — *A.D., The Strange Case of Sarah Manlove*
- Ken MacLeod — *The Star Fraction, The Stone Canal, The Cassini Division*
- Paul McAuley — *The Quiet War*
- Suzy McKee Charnas — *The Holdfast Chronicles*
- China Miéville — *Iron Council, Un Lun Dun, Perdido Street Station*
- Alan Moore — *V for Vendetta*
- Grant Morrison — *The Invisibles*
- Pat Murphy — *The City, Not Long After*
- Cris Newport — *The White Bones of Truth*
- Alice Nunn — *Illicit Passage*
- George Orwell — *1984*
- Marge Piercy — *Woman on the Edge of Time, He She and It*
- Philip Pullman — *The Golden Compass, The Subtle Knife, The Amber Spyglass*
- Kim Stanley Robinson — *Red Mars, Green Mars, Blue Mars, Antarctica*
- Joanna Russ — *The Female Man, The Two of Them*
- Nisi Shawl — *Filter House*
- Starhawk — *The Fifth Sacred Thing*
- Joan Slonczewski — *A Door Into Ocean*
- Bruce Sterling — *Islands in the Net, "Maneki Neko"* 6
- Charles Stross — *Singularity Sky, Iron Sunrise* 21
- Michael Swanwick — *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*
- Michael Swanwick and Eileen Gunn — "Zeppelin City"
- Amy Thompson — *The Color of Distance, Virtual Girl*
- Brian K. Vaughan — *Y: The Last Man*
- Brian Wood and Riccardo Burchelli — *DMZ*



# Bio-mechanic Anthropomorphism

## Mr Mead



Photo courtesy Luke Vagnolini

Tom Mead, alias Mr Mead, is an illustrator/ animator who favors the surreal or otherworldly side of art. A traditional artist working from the Jamaica street studios in Bristol, England, Mr Mead has applied his fertile imagination and skilled hands to creating a series of anthropomorphic inhuman animal characters, a few of whom are shown here. He “draws the stuff of his nightmares; dark, soulless creatures with hollow eyes and mechanical hearts.”† But there is a hint of humor in each piece. In an interview with *Crack* about his work, Mr Mead replied to a comment, “You obviously see a certain darkness in this combination of animal and human,” with this: “A lot of people say that, but I don’t think I’m there yet in terms of darkness. I’ve always loved doing the hollow eyes because I think it de-humanizes the characters immediately. It doesn’t matter what they look like. You get rid of the pupils and it seems to completely get rid of their souls. No I wouldn’t say they were dark, I would say they are a little bit tongue-in-cheek; I find them quite funny.”

And what is the backstory that led to his current work? He says, “From an early age I have been terrified of people wearing animal suits, all due to Reginald Mills 1976 ballet film, *The Tales of Beatrix Potter*. To this day I still cannot watch it! Recently though I decided to embrace my fear to try and get over it instead of running away; ever since I have been drawing animal people. I like the idea of people mixed with machines and have nicknamed what I do as ‘British Bio-Mechanic Anthropomorphism,’ which is a bit of a mouthful!”‡ Mr Mead draws what he is scared of and draws to release his inner demons.

This unique anthropomorphism has dominated Mead’s recent work, including a one-a-day series where he labored to produce an image daily, which morphed into a recent series of playing cards shown last April at the Antlers Gallery in Bristol. (Check out the show here: <http://www.antlersgallery.com/project/dark-suits/>.)

He created 54 individually designed playing cards, adapting some of his existing characters and drawing other new ones. The characters are grouped into suits, with Birds as the Hearts, Horned Beasts as Diamonds, Cats as Spades, and Foxes as Clubs. As the *Crack* interviewer said, “[t]he images reveal a literal hell of an imagination, a creative mind that throws unexpected images and ideas together with a remarkable frequency, forming nightmarish yet endearing creatures that pose more questions than they answer.”

Created primarily in pen and ink, many of the originals pieces are drawn large scale. For smaller pieces Mead uses a fine dip pen to get the detail. For the larger pieces he draws on big sheets of sanded medium-density fiberboard (MDF), often going through up to 45 pens each drawing. He tends to work on a lightbox but occasionally on the floor. Some originals have been as much as 6 feet tall, and he is working on concepts for massive paper drawings and murals to cover the sides of buildings.

What else is next for Mr Mead? He is currently collaborating with a writer on a graphic novel. The reason this whole series of bio-mechanical animals started was because he began to think about creating a dark folk-tale book, old folk tales, brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After initially trying to write up the stories himself, he realized he needed a partner for the project and that a compilation of stories was much too ambitious. So, Mead searched out a writer colleague, picked one tale (a well-known Korean folk tale, “The Fox Sister”), and turned it over to his partner to begin the process of reworking the old tale into a graphic novel. It’s going to be a huge undertaking, creating a full world with every character deepened and imagined anew. This will surely be a world worth entering.

† From an interview with *Crack*: June 18, <http://www.youlovecrack.com/article/300/mr-mead>

‡ Coates and Scarry interview: <http://coatesandscarry.com/mr-mead/>

For more about Mr Mead and his work:  
<http://www.mrmead.co.uk/>  
<http://www.antlersgallery.com/>  
<http://www.jamaicastreetartists.co.uk/>

[“Happiness Disaster” is the cover illustration for Kristin Livdahl’s novella, *A Brood of Foxes*, Aqueduct Press, 2011.]





*The Feast of Children*



*Diving Bull*



*Cat Blanche*



*Happiness Disaster*



*The Voxman*



*Dark Suits Cards*



# Aqueductistas at WisCon 35



*Nancy Jane Moore, Andrea Hairston, Eileen Gunn, & Nisi Shawl  
in the panel "Black Souls in White Clones: Swimming in Shawl's  
'Deep End'"*



*Timmi Duchamp at the Aqueduct Table in the Dealers' Room*



*Eleanor Arnason at the Sunday afternoon  
Aqueduct Reading*



*Nancy Jane Moore, Carolyn Gilman, Mary Anne Mohanraj, Eileen Gunn, &  
Claire Light during the Aqueduct reading at Michaelangelo's Coffeehouse*

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