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Compost 1 ๑ Ruby Rae Jones

"If your takeaway...is that *The Cascadia Subduction Zone* sounds really interesting, you're not wrong—it's a wonderful journal filled with thoughtful and insightful criticism."

๑ Niall Harrison, *The Guardian*, May 12, 2016

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In This Issue

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Cover banner collagraph of the Cascadia subduction zone by Marilyn Liden Bode

We Gotta Get Out of This Place

by Gwynne Garfinkle

My mom used to drop me off at Ye Olde Rummage Room on Saturday afternoons when I was thirteen. I bought my copy of the Rolling Stones' *Big Hits (High Tide and Green Grass)* there; the disc was a little warped, but the cover included a booklet of color photos of the forbiddingly gorgeous young Rolling Stones. The shop consisted of a few rooms cluttered with old clothes (before the term "vintage" came into vogue), magazines, what else? Knick knacks, baseball cards, Kewpie dolls? I seem to recall doilies on the tables, braided rugs on the floors. But I was laser-focused on one corner that contained a bin of old LPs and a rack of 1960s teen magazines.

One day I was flipping through LPs by Donovan, Herman's Hermits, and Elvis, when I found a copy of *The Best of the Animals*, with Eric Burdon and the rest of the band posing sulkily on the cover. I took the LP out of its paper sleeve. Would there be fine spiderwebby scratches or deep gouges to make the needle skip? Side one looked okay, aside from a spatter of fingerprints, and I flipped the record over.

I stared in incomprehension: my name was carved in haphazard capital letters into the inner groove, along with a couple of jagged X's. Time seemed to stand still in the shop. I looked around; there was no one else in the room or what I could see of the next room. For all I knew, there was no one else in the store aside from the woman behind the counter. The cozy browsing atmosphere of the place had changed to something fraught.

I put the album back in the sleeve and examined the cover. It was in decent shape, with no markings aside from the store's $2 sticker. I looked at the disc again, and my name and those X's confronted me once more. Could the record have belonged to someone with my name? That seemed like an awfully big coincidence. I'd never known anyone whose first name was spelled the same way as mine. Could someone I knew have put the record here for me to find? There were plenty of kids at school who disliked me (mostly because I liked sixties music better than top 40), but none who would go out of their way to do such a thing. Besides, I didn't think any of them even knew about this place. No one but my mom knew I was going to the Rummage Room today, and I hadn't been in several weeks. How could this be happening? My face felt hot, my hands cold.

I slid the LP inside the cover again and glanced at my watch. It was about time for my mom to pick me up. I didn't want the album now, but I couldn't bring myself to leave it, either. I brought it to the counter at the front of the store. The stout, gray-haired woman took my cash and put the LP in a paper bag. I went outside and stood at the curb on Woodman watching cars drift by. The sun was beginning to set to my right. I had on jeans and a t-shirt, and my arms felt a bit chilly. The cars, the trees, the sun itself seemed unreal. In a couple of minutes, my mom's car pulled up.

"Did you find something good?" Mom asked cheerfully as we headed home.

I shrugged. "Just one album." I'd been in such a good mood when she'd dropped me off. Now everything felt wrong.

At home, I propped the paper bag containing the LP against my shelves of albums. I turned on the radio, sat on my bed, and stared at the bag as if there was a malevolent entity inside it, invading my room plastered with Beatles posters. "Under My Thumb" came on the radio, which somehow made me feel worse, though I loved that song.

Mom had made chicken, rice, and green beans for dinner. I silently pushed the green beans around my plate. Every minute or so I pictured those carved letters on the LP's inner groove, and a jolt of adrenaline went through me. "Are you sure you don't want to go to the movie with us?" Mom asked.

"What are you seeing, again?" I asked.

"*An Unmarried Woman*," Dad said. "It's supposed to be good."

I chewed and swallowed a bit of chicken. "I just don't feel like going." I noticed my parents' looks of amiable concern. They couldn't help me, not with this.

When my parents left for the movie, I wished I'd gone with them after all. I thought about calling my best friend

Elsie and telling her about the album, but I knew it would sound crazy. Maybe she would even think I'd defaced the LP myself. I couldn't tell her or anyone. I sat on my bed and listened to the occasional sounds of my neighborhood—a door slamming, a car driving off, a dog barking. Finally I got up and took the record out of the bag. I looked at the disc again. My name and the X's were still there. Had I hoped I'd imagined the whole thing? Maybe that would have been even worse. Was there something obscene about the X's, or were they more generally threatening? Threatening to X me out?

I put the album on my turntable and sat on the bed with my hands wrapped around my knees. Side one sounded fine. A little surface noise, but nothing out of the ordinary. I was listening too carefully for anything strange to enjoy the English R&B music. "House of the Rising Sun" with its eerie keyboard and howling vocals was too ominous for me right now, even though it was the main reason I'd wanted to buy the album.

Heart pounding, I got up, turned the record to the side with my name and the X's, and sat on my bed again. There was a fair bit of crackling surface noise on the first track, "We Gotta Get Out of This Place." I let out a gasp: men's voices were whispering in the surface noise. *Be careful the world is not yours. How dare you think the music belongs to you? The world is ours never forget.* The men kept whispering, sometimes inaudible, sometimes crystal clear in their contempt. Sometimes it was one man, sometimes a murmuring chorus. I couldn't tell how many of them there were. *Who do you think you are? Ugly little girl. You're nothing. The music is ours. The world is ours.*

I got to my feet and crept to the turntable as if towards a rattling snake. I pulled the stylus off the album, stood there breathing fast. Then I lifted the record off the spindle. I held the album in my hands, the carved words and the X's menacing me. I was tempted to bend the record until it broke, take the pieces outside, and throw them in the trash.

It really wasn't fair. I'd always liked the Animals whenever K-Earth or KRLA played them. I had paid my two dollars and change for the album. The music was mine as much as anyone else's. Who were these men to tell me anything?

I put the LP back on the turntable and put the needle down at the start of side two. "We've Gotta Get Out of This Place" started to play again. When the surface noise began, I made myself listen past the whispering men. I tapped my foot to the rhythm. Then I began to dance. I waved my arms and shuffled my feet. I must have looked goofy, but it felt good. It felt free. I danced defiantly around my room. I could breathe again. I danced to Eric Burdon's guttural voice that warned of my untimely death. Those men's voices would always be there, but I moved to the song of escape.

Gwynne Garfinkle lives in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Uncanny, Strange Horizons, Apex, Lackington's,* and *Not One of Us.* Her collection of short fiction and poetry, *People Change*, is available from Aqueduct Press.

Maiden, Mother, Crone

First Generation: The Deputy Chief Medic Refuses to Watch the Shuttle Launch Video

by T.D. Walker

If I ask why you chose to freeze
the crowd, their faces upturned,
still in that moment of stillness
before the shuttle broke away—

I'll ask instead if you'd feared us
thinking about that first contact
between ourselves and our past
lovers, clinging to a kite string

as if we were a key in a storm. Maybe
it's better that there's no rain here, no
sizable body of water that isn't
monitored each moment. No bridges,

no rails on which a lock can hold,
can rust. I like to think of Earth
as a cay, but not as the part
obscured by the shuttle's walls.

They flew us over the Atlantic.
Even when bodies lie still, they tell
some story about flood waters rising
too fast for us to flee or too slowly:

like a bad proverb, like a bad escape
velocity. If I ask you why stillness,
will you tell me I see bodies too much
as bodies? After you have seen us,

cataloged each pulse and whisper,
let us board and find in those faces
across that aisle between us something
we should have known already,

but didn't.

…if you remember at all
the security camera
at the rest stop halfway
between Dallas and Austin—

when you realized I'd seen you
focused on the magazine rack but not
on the covers. The girls outside hiding
from the sun or your teenage gaze.

Was it any different, say,
Dad watching the woman behind the
counter, slicing apart the kolaches that
Mom had ordered for the drive—

I saw her too, watching herself. Mom,
who came from this town or one like it,
once behind the counter herself—
Was it any different, say,

on later trips to teach us about ourselves,
about who we'd become before
breaking the pieces apart,
like some heritage that wasn't ours—

You drive your daughters to this
place, order the same container
as we did decades ago. Broken
apart, you married, our parents

returned to themselves. Now
when I think about writing you,
you should remember that place,
the way the light came in . . .

T.D. Walker is the author of *Small Waiting Objects* (CW Books, 2019), a collection of near-future science fiction poems. Her poems and stories have appeared in S*trange Horizons, Web Conjunctions, The Cascadia Subduction Zone, Luna Station Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She draws on both her grounding in literary studies and her experience as a computer programmer in writing poetry and fiction.

Middle Generations: The Archivist Receives an Invitation to a Dinner Party Aboard Ship at Which Vintage-Style Gelatin Dishes Are Served but Not Consumed

by T.D. Walker

(after Liss LaFleur's Firework*)*

Before the dinner
party I feed you
enough not to fill
your calling bodies,
but enough to keep you
hungry and curious,
reaching for the edge
of the weighted table,
for the dinner we will
not eat. You ask for
an explanation: gelatin,
clear and preserved,
not glass but a material I call
glass. Hard, yielding
a view into the form.
Here, inside, you
witnessing, I tell them,
what was meant to be
preserved for consumption.
We keep these shapes
as a link back to a past
we must question. Need
called for the molds'
metals to be scrapped
ages ago, but I still fear you
will see their fluted edges
along the bridges' rails,
their bases' inverted
cups holding the past
year's failed seeds to be
studied in the gardens.
You ask for more, more
than I can give you.
Need calls for more than
maps we have given you:
lines between self and self,
a world hollowed
and shaped by who
we no longer are, a world
you must reshape,
a world you must
break apart.

you can make a
perfect package
at the factory
on these occasions:
fresh,
the young housewife
out of the box—
a bright, refreshing taste.
ready for distribution
the exclusive little spread
for any occasion.
the housewife looks
nothing but real.
yours for the asking,
a clear crimson mold.
now's the time for
a really new idea—
a wise woman
can take on many shapes.
you may find
man-pleasing
suggests the end,
artificially enhanced
to keep it "locked in."
inspecting them now
you can serve
in any other kind of package
things you already like:
lovesick
upon request.
a sure surprise to the housewife
can be prepared:
suggest
the aid of
many other methods,
see the difference.
to bring out the best,
unmold
cleverly sealed
beauty, too,
for the pleasure she derives.
Now's the time.

(Phrases in the right column are taken from vintage Jell-o ads, most of which are compiled here: https://www.chronicallyvintage.com/2015/10/adventures-in-vintage-advertising-jell.html)

Middle Generations: The Engineer Aboard the Generation Ship Compiles a List of Objects in Her Daughter's Diorama of Houston

by T.D. Walker

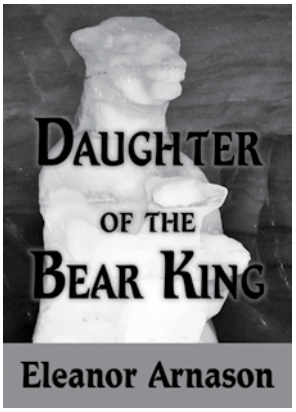
> "[...] you succeed based on values that have always made America a force for goodness and progress in our world"
> —President George H.W. Bush, in a letter included in *Wings in Orbit: Scientific and Engineering Legacies of the Space Shuttle*

These hinges bent, right	*To show the city: this*	"the remarkable men"
angles forced by impact	*is the story she tells me.*	"drawn to challenge"
or a child's focus;	*This is a building, glass not*	"women"
A fragment of window glass	*giving us a view into life*	"shaped"
from that explosive or	*as it must have been then.*	"the most vital"
routine maintenance;	*Did I tell her we came from*	"push back"
A vent slat, leaning	*there? Or did she learn*	"the horizon"
toward or away	*where the commands*	"to me"
from the hinges;	*come from, more or less?*	"suggested"
Dust from the slat,	*Not people, then,*	"no man"
or what we call dust,	*that she can connect to there.*	"where no man has gone"
too fine to recycle;	*The stories became long-*	"gone before"
An absence of dust,	*distant—she could have caught*	"mankind as a whole"
a fingerprint or a finger	*in the image of this place that isn't*	"mankind"
moved too quickly to print;	*the Houston that was*	"manned"
A tea-cup's handle, its rim	(*as it happened to be)*	"American"
an echo of your grandfather's	*when the mock-shuttle landed,*	"spirit"
mouth against breath;	*held in place by flight*	"of innovation"
The pneumatic bones of hens,	*or the image of flight.*	Independence, "American"
whose limbs become longer	*she corrects me, which is a sign*	"of American leadership"
and weaker each generation;	*that we once shared a past.*	"America a force"—
A skull of a squirrel, not	*What I told her, our family,*	"to alight from the ports"
a species brought aboard	*where we came from, she*	"opened our Shuttle and"
the ship by the first of us;	*denies, she corrects.*	"the world"
The thin plait of your baby	*We must let go of it, like*	"the essence of"
hair, which I'd kept from	*what we've let go of before,*	"values"
becoming a necessary thing;	*the way we no longer speak*	"today"
Larval lacewings, caught	*in languages from Earth.*	"awareness"
and writhing against glass,	*Which isn't true,*	"bring our world"
now released into the garden;	*since we can't deny*	"progress"
The glass that held	*our point of origin.*	"courageous"
beneath its unwrithing surface	Independence, *she says,*	"your leadership"
that which is unable	*will always be a word*	"in the process, help"
to imprint itself entirely,	*in the stories we tell*	"succeeding generations"
to escape without us.	*to escape who we were.*	"to answer the call."

The right column consists of phrases taken from the same document as the epigraph.

Eleanor Arnason's *Daughter of the Bear King*

reviewed by Pat Murphy



Until I read Eleanor Arnason's Daughter of the Bear King*, I did not know that I had been waiting all my life for a heroine who is middle-aged and, by her own reckoning, a little too plump.*

Think of a heroine. Picture her in your mind. Consider her age, her appearance, her upbringing. Where does she live? What does she wear? What are her aspirations?

Are you thinking of someone athletic, clear-eyed, good with a blade, and quick on her feet? In her twenties, maybe her thirties? Tall most likely. An orphan, maybe? Or a princess with an attitude? Is her hair long and flowing—or cut short so she can masquerade as a boy?

Forget all that. Anyone can imagine a heroine like that. Many have.

Until I read Eleanor Arnason's *Daughter of the Bear King*, I did not know that I had been waiting all my life for a heroine who is middle-aged and, by her own reckoning, a little too plump. Her hair is going gray; her skin is getting wrinkled.

I didn't realize that what I really wanted was Esperance Olson, a heroine who married at twenty and raised two kids in south Minneapolis. Now, at age forty plus, with the kids out of the house, she is vaguely dissatisfied with her life. Not an orphan, not an athlete. Just a woman who has always had strange dreams of another world.

One day, propelled by an electric shock from her malfunctioning washing machine, Esperance Olson travels to another world. She arrives naked on a foggy beach. There she's greeted by an aged wizard who has been waiting twenty years for her, his joints aching in the fog. He takes her to the queen of the mountain, where Esperance learns that she is a bear child, fathered by the Bear King, an ancient and powerful mountain spirit, and sent to Earth to grow up in safety.

This magical world has problems. Magic comes from an understanding of the pattern of power that underlies all things. But that pattern is changing. Wizards can sense a mind twisting and distorting the pattern. But they cannot stop the terrible changes wrought by the mind in the pattern.

Esperance is the hero that the people of this world have been waiting for. Yes, they call her a hero, though she observes that the correct term would be "heroine." But the world needs a hero and Esperance is it.

Esperance is a hero I can identify with, from the moment she takes on the shape of a she bear to battle a shape-shifting monster with the face of her professorial husband, then shambles off to the mountain, fat and powerful. No need for a sword—she has her claws. (Her nails, she observes, have always been difficult to trim.)

Now you might figure that this is a tale about the battle between good and evil. You would be wrong. *Daughter of the Bear King* is about the battle between integrity and shoddiness. As Arnason describes these forces in her afterword, integrity is "respect for yourself, respect for others, respect for nature and art." Shoddiness, on the other hand, is "everything slippery and sleazy, badly made and dishonest." In this time of fake news and lies, this is a battle that hits close to home.

Shoddiness reveals itself in many ways: "...a deterioration in those qualities that make life worth living and—at the same time—an increase in aggravations. Cockroaches became more difficult to kill. Men who went...to taverns to enjoy themselves by having a few quiet beers, began to argue and to fight."

In her afterword, Arnason writes: "Originally, I meant the two contestants as a joke. But you will have a better life if you avoid shoddiness and stick with integrity, though you may not make as much money." True enough, but the joke is still there. Arnason's humor is deliv-

ered in a dry, matter-of-fact Midwestern voice that I can't resist. Who says feminists have no sense of humor? (Well, lots of people. But all of them are wrong.)

The forces of shoddiness are well-organized—equipped with organizational charts and rules and very annoying moral precepts and platitudes. Their dragons are not the noble beasts of legend. Rather they were "dingy little flying lizards with no wit at all, only malice." Their monsters are second-rate: "creatures that looked like chickens or snails or a combination of the two." When attempting to persuade people to give up, they talk about being practical and realistic. They want you to conform, to do things the "right" way, to be content.

The forces of shoddiness are not confined to the magical world. (But I'm guessing you already know that.) This novel came from the Second Wave of Feminism, and Esperance's experiences on Earth reflect that. Social pressures—in the form of her husband and psychotherapist—tell her she should be content. And monsters in the magical world echo that advice.

My favorite moment was when a giant squid speaks to Esperance in the voice of her therapist, Dr. Ferris. "This is all a delusion! You are not an epic heroine! You are a housewife from south Minneapolis.... I am trying to help you.... But you have to cooperate." I have news for Dr. Ferris: one can be both a Minneapolis housewife and an epic heroine. Eleanor Arnason has shown us that.

Arnason's tale is infused with a vivid practicality. If you fight monster birds, you'll end up covered in blood and bird shit. Shift between worlds and you'll arrive naked. You'll need to find clothes at the other side. Sometimes, clothes are conveniently available. Sometimes, the best option requires creative improvisation. (Ever spent the night keeping warm with a blanket of live rats or avoiding sunburn with a hat constructed of kelp?)

I found so much to love in this novel. I learned about the true meaning of whale song, the deep thoughts of whales, the dreams of otters, the anger of dragons, and the poetry of rats (which is mostly about food).

And if all that is not enough to pique your interest in this novel, it includes appendices that provide nonessential but fascinating background information. Perhaps you don't care that the people of the Dry Plain make cheese that is bright red and tastes like cheddar—and send it to the King of Bashoo as tribute. Maybe you don't need to know that the kingdom of Bashoo is always ruled by a king and his mother, a combination that ensures a balance of male and female, youth and old age. But I discovered that I needed to know it. Not only to know it, but to mull it over and consider what an excellent arrangement that would be.

These appendices have footnotes, which are also wonderful, for those of us who care about these things. The rest of you can ignore them. (Your loss.)

Daughter of the Bear King took me places I did not expect to go—but I was very glad to get there. There are people who want the books they read to be like comfort food: familiar, nothing too surprising. I am not one of those people.

This novel was first published in 1987. Since that time, Eleanor Arnason has written others, including *Woman of the Iron People*, which won the Tiptree Award (now known as the Otherwise Award), and many wonderful short stories, too.

I have long believed that the first step in changing the world is imagining a new one. That isn't easy to do. It is so much simpler to just borrow from what you've seen so many times before. Eleanor Arnason doesn't do that. And for that, I am very grateful.

[Original publication 1987 by Avon Books; ebook available now from Aqueduct Press]

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Pat Murphy's speculative fiction has won two Nebula Awards, the Philip K. Dick Award, and the World Fantasy Award. With Karen Joy Fowler, Pat co-founded the Otherwise Award, a prize for speculative fiction that expands our understanding of gender.

"The Sweetest Fruit of Summer" by R. K. Duncan, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* (#285), edited by Scott H. Andrews
"And Now His Lordship Is Laughing" by Shiv Ramdas, *Strange Horizons* (9/9/19), edited by Vanessa Rose Phin
"Malinche" by Gabriela Santiago, *Clarkesworld* (#156), edited by Neil Clarke

by Karen Burnham

For some columns I have to painstakingly piece together stories that speak to each other across months or years. Not this time—these three all hit my to-read pile within a week or two of each other. So shall we go ahead and talk about colonialism? Let's.

Colonialism—when the strong move in and exploit the weak, however you define "strong" and "weak," and rule them from far away. For the last 500 years or so of world history, that has largely meant expeditions fanning out from Europe to find "new lands" and claim them from whoever happens to be living there at the time. Over and over again this has led to the enrichment of Europeans and the deaths and poverty of the indigenous population. The wonderful thing about speculative literature is its ability to question and subvert what we know of "the real world." The three stories considered here all use the techniques of sf, broadly defined, to subvert the typical colonial narrative, going so far as to wrest control of that narrative back for the colonized "subjects." In all of these stories there is a central figure: a woman co-opted because of some skill that the colonizers wish to possess and use. In these stories she's allowed to use the leverage afforded to her by the colonizer's own greed to seize power and gain control of the agenda.

The story that is set closest to our time is "And Now His Lordship Is Laughing" by Shiv Ramdas. It starts with a description of a lush and fertile land, Bengal, and an older woman, Apa, both a leader and a craftswoman. She specializes in making dolls from jute and thinks that she might have a chance to teach her eager and adorable grandson Nilesh the art form. Some British soldiers arrive and ask her (politely, in their minds, but incredibly condescendingly) for a doll to give to the Governor's wife. The governor here is the historical Sir John Arthur Herbert, governor of Bengal from 1939 to his death in 1943. Apa refuses, partly because the governor's own policies make craft like this difficult to maintain and partly because she prefers not to be forced to give gifts under duress.

We immediately fast forward to a scene of complete devastation. Nilesh is dead; there are corpses everywhere. A once vibrant landscape is burned, and Apa is in the process of starving to death. We're now in the middle of the Bengal famine of 1943, the historical event through which natural causes and British WWII policies combined to kill two to three *million* Bengalis by starvation and disease. The British captain returns and force feeds Apa, "saving" her so that she can make that doll the governor's wife still wants. She's absolutely stunned, but her rage finally hits on a plan, and she allows herself to live, just a while longer. She makes the doll and convinces the captain that she must deliver it herself, in person.

The trip to the governor's mansion in Calcutta is a parade of horrors; even some of the soldiers are sickened by the piles of dead and dying humans and animals. Inside the Governor's House, of course, a perfectly lovely dinner party is under way—no starvation here. When Apa is finally granted her audience, she and the doll start laughing—and the laughter is contagious and unstoppable. The people in that room laugh until they collapse and eventually die. She walks out—protected from the hideous laughter by jute ear plugs—and waits for her fate to catch up with her. This is obviously a secret history, an account of background events not generally known; while the famine is real and Governor Herbert did die in 1943, most likely a cursed *putul* was not the cause.

Moving away from direct history, "The Sweetest Fruit of Summer" by R. K. Duncan is set in a secondary fantasy world. Here there are a number of communities that border a large central

plain that is dominated by a successful nomadic tribe. The leader of this tribe always chooses a bride from Corra's village, and she is 18 when he comes for her. She has been raised with this role in mind; her mother focused most of her efforts on her second daughter being raised to rule after her, while Corra, although the eldest, was more of an afterthought. They expected her to be taken at a younger age, but the nomads didn't come around until she was older. Corra is grabbed and taken to the tribe's encampment and married in a public ceremony, but the leader is kinder than he has to be, treating her decently and not demanding sex. Instead he alludes to a different purpose for her.

It turns out that only women from her village have proven strong enough to ingest a particular psychedelic fruit seed and survive to relate the prophecies that come as part of the near-poisoning experience. Based on the information Corra relays from her visions, her husband twice has excellent success in raiding strongholds and preventing counterattacks. He's content to let her go several months without eating more seeds, since the experience leaves her quite ill. The third time she eats fewer seeds and maintains more control of the visions, directing him back to her own village and the finest stores that her mother hides to keep them from the raiders.

She rides with him as he kills her mother and ransacks her house, giving away prizes, including young girls, to all his battle companions (as Corra knew he would). Corra speaks to the women, and after the men enjoy a night of excess she kills her husband in his sleep and all the girls kill the men they were given to. Corra takes leadership of her town and makes sure that in the future, peace will not be bought by giving girls to raiders. Now her knowledge of the nomadic people and their ways will help keep her people safe.

Returning to our world, "Malinche" by Gabriela Santiago is a fascinating tale. It stems from the real history of Hernán Cortés's first interactions with the Mesoamerican civilizations starting in 1519. He needed translators, one of which was a young woman. We meet her as an older girl enslaved after her well-off family fell on hard times. Like Corra she was considered expendable in a way her little brother was not. In this story she is scavenging for parts to help maintain her owner's electrical automatons. It takes a little reading between the lines, but eventually you realize that in this alternate history the Aztecs have discovered the basic principles of DC electricity, with some places having their own batteries or primitive generators, and they are able to make simple robots to help with basic chores. Malinalli, as she is then known, is quite good with them.

When the Spanish arrive she is given to them, since she is one of the few around who can translate between Nahuatl and Chontal (Cortés already has one man who can translate from Spanish to Nahuatl). She learns Spanish quickly, rendering the other translator obsolete; she is obviously several kinds of genius. She assists Cortés in his expeditions, sleeping with him when she must (in our world's history she bore him a son, Martín, considered the first mestizo in the New World). She is sometimes shocked when he goes far outside the bounds of what her culture considers the rules of warfare, but has little sympathy with the society that sold her into slavery or the king, Moctezuma, who has no idea how to handle the Spanish.

She leverages her position into opportunities to conduct extra research into electrical phenomena, quickly coming to the Tesla-like realization that AC current can be harnessed across much farther distances and generate considerably more power than DC can. After the central cities are devastated by the plague that spreads like wildfire after the arrival of the Europeans (in our world the Spanish took advantage of both conflicts between different states on the South American continent as well as the massive death toll from infectious disease to establish their footholds), our heroine (now known as Marina to Cortés but known to history as La Malinche) sets out to eliminate Cortés. She creates an army of automatons, unnoticed by anyone else because of their ubiquitous servility, and turns them on the Spanish, trapping them with electrified fences. She gets to give Cortés a lecture

Cont. on p. 13

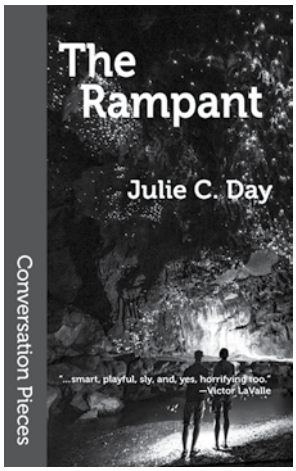
Kicking Underworld Butt

The Rampant by Julie C. Day, Aqueduct Press, October 2019, 140 pp., $12.00

reviewed by Arley Sorg

The end of the world as we know it has happened: hordes of Sumerian gods and monsters roam the Earth, eating the unwary and disrupting (but not stopping) everyday routines.

The Rampant is a recent installment in Aqueduct's Conversation Pieces series (#69), which is intended to celebrate "the speculations and visions of the grand conversation of feminist sf." But let's get this right: this novella is first and foremost a cool adventure story featuring two teen girls. Which isn't to say the "grand conversation" isn't there, or that the backbone of the story isn't erudite—because both of those elements stand strong. But it's also just a fun read about two girls setting out to salvage what's left of humanity.



The end of the world as we know it has happened: hordes of Sumerian gods and monsters roam the Earth, eating the unwary and disrupting (but not stopping) everyday routines. The process of ending everything, however, remains incomplete. One key character, the Rampant—the final herald of the apocalypse—has failed to show. As a consequence, everyone has been stuck in a nightmarish apocalypse mode for ten years, instead of being brought to the Rapture—the ascension part of The End. It's up to sixteen-year-old Gillian Halkey and her closest friend, Emilia "Mel" Bareilles, to drag the Rampant from his home so that he will usher in the Rapture: "Wholesale perfect deaths for everyone," the means by which people can move on to either Nibiru (the home of the King of Heaven and Earth) or the Netherworld. And, more importantly, to bring an end to the constant terrors of the apocalypse.

There are some minor hiccups with the story. Bits of information get repeated too often, to the point that this becomes a distraction. In a few cases it's perhaps understandable—a character might mention being thirsty over and over because it's an overriding concern. But in other cases it seems unnecessary. Second, other bits of information came too late, or didn't quite add up, or seemed missing, or even contradictory in moments. I found myself stopping to flip pages, double-checking info, or having to reassemble a scene I'd already pictured because of the order of information, and so on, all of which pulled me out of the read from time to time. Third, I wasn't convinced about Gillian's breadth of knowledge. It's plausible or arguable, I suppose, but to me it seemed uneven: she knew things I wasn't sure she'd know, and yet didn't know other things, or rather, only knew them because of TV shows and moments referenced specifically as explanation for said knowledge. Lastly, the middle of the story is more about the protagonists enduring than making decisions and doing things. Obstacles arise and other characters resolve the obstacles, while the young women have reactions and respond emotionally (as well as through conversation), but they do not exactly act or definitively impact the plot, other than to decide to continue.

But I need to stress this point: *The Rampant* is still a marvelous book.

I read it, I finished it, and I'm glad for having read it. The establishing shots create a lovely, grim atmosphere right from the start. The narrative continues with wonderful horror imagery and moments of tension, couched in a classic-feeling "mission to the Underworld" story (pick your favorite for comparison; there are many, and this one holds up, drawing heavily on Sumerian tales). The language is approachable but smart, occasionally flexing deep research without showing off—anyone who loves mythology (especially Sumerian or related myths) will

get an extra level of enjoyment. There's a pleasant, fairly dry, "geeky humor" to the voice, filigreed with occasional snark. And of course at least two running commentaries, one on religion/myth and the other on gender, rooted in the premise itself, which posits a non-Judeo-Christian "Truth" and sets a female teen as star of the hero's journey.

These last two points are very important; perhaps they are why this book belongs in the Conversation Pieces. Gillian is chosen via visions and undertakes what is essentially a holy quest, the sort of quest typically given to male characters in stories, whether the story is religious or fictional. By placing the story in Gillian's perspective, the text interrogates and challenges assumptions around heroic goals, values, and tactics, as well as religious methods. Ultimately, it speaks to power, inequality, and fear, pitching the braying masses of monsters and conniving gods against a teenaged girl, a character who holds all of humanity's hopes in her hands, and who must exert different kinds of power to get where she needs to go.

The best features of the book for me are the characters themselves and the relationship between the girls. The heart of this book is how girls stand in relationship to each other, how they treat each other, how they take care of each other or fail to do so: not only the main characters but other girls as well, and by extension, girls as a whole. These ideas are explored through tragedy, trial, and triumph. They are examined up close, in the tug between the two main characters, and at arm's length, in the choices and consequences surrounding other girls. During the mission to the Underworld we meet Rebecca and Adala. Exactly what solidarity means and how far it should be taken is examined through facing the horrors of the Plains and the Hubur River. How Mel and Gillian undertake the journey, as individuals and as a team, is different for each character, marking them complementary but capable. Moreover, we see the development of intimacy between Gillian and her childhood friend, boundaries tested, emotions navigated. The exploration of the friendship between the two is touching and feels real. Meanwhile, the thematic exploration of female solidarity is nothing less than inspiring.

This is a book that needs to be read, especially by girls and women who enjoy myth and horror and want to see female heroes; but also by everyone else, because we all need to see these characters and appreciate the subtleties of their journeys.

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Arley Sorg lives in Oakland, CA. A 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate, he's an associate editor at *Locus Magazine* and does odd jobs for *Lightspeed Magazine.* He's soldering together a novel, has thrown a few short stories into orbit, and hopes to launch more.

Dust Lanes (cont. from p. 11)

as he is splayed out at her mercy, keeping his heart beating with an AC power source long after it has been torn out of his body. In this timeline she is able to make use of her knowledge of electrical technology and what she now knows of the Spanish and their tactics, and it is clear that history will play out very differently for her than in our world. With an army of robots at her command, colonialism may well move in a completely different direction.

It's worth asking the question: "Why?" Why bother writing these alternate histories when our history clearly didn't play out that way? The answer may be closely bound up with the truth that colonialism isn't something that happened long ago—it's something we're living with today. There are still people in power who are using others far removed from themselves, who need subjects to get all the things that they want. These stories remind us, living in the world today, that the dynamic that seems too often to crush the colonized under its heel has the potential to offer a fulcrum, a leverage point. There's room for protest, although the cost be dear, and any system can be subverted. While the past didn't turn out the way these alternate histories imagine, who's to say what the future will bring?

Karen Burnham is vocationally an electromagnetics engineer and avocationally a book reviewer and critic. She writes for *Locus Magazine* online and other venues. Her single author study of Greg Egan is available from University of Illinois Press. She works in the automotive industry in Michigan, where she lives with her family.

These Are Not Your Grandpappy's Warriors

Meet Me in the Future by Kameron Hurley, Tachyon Publications LLC, August 2019, 352 pp., $15.95

reviewed by Laura A. Gilliam

Much currently published SFF puts new faces in old tropes, resulting in a succession of badass warriors of every heritage and hue.

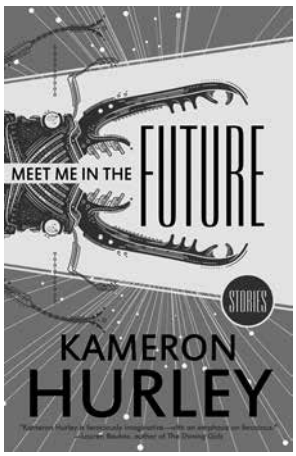
One of the mind-expanding charms of SFFH is that it can act as both mirror and window, showing us who we humans have been and what might come next. Likewise, much of the enduring energy of SFFH lies in its constant debate about and revision of the look forward and the look behind. A classic mirror presented by past SFFH writers is of the talented, ruthless warrior defending the place of humanity (or, at least one's particular section of humanity) in a merciless universe.

Much currently published SFF puts new faces in old tropes, resulting in a succession of badass warriors of every heritage and hue.

The short stories collected in Kameron Hurley's *Meet Me in the Future* drive firmly in the path of this balance, skillfully exploring the archetype of the hard-edged warrior protagonist (or antihero) with breadth and imagination. *Meet Me in the Future* has everything a rabid puppy could want. In piece after piece, Hurley gives readers enough sticky, corpse-strewn battlefields and diseased, mutilated bodies to rival any doorstop-sized horror, thriller, or adventure saga. Likewise, her protagonists run the gamut of skin colors, sexualities, and genders. In the main, they are accomplished warriors, as hard-boiled, jaded, and ruthless as any from SFF's so-called golden age. And yet, *Meet Me in the Future* steers clear of the customary payoff: the glory. While ably satisfying the badass warrior trope, Hurley ultimately begs the question: Are we tired of this yet? As our species moves forward into other worlds, will war always be with us, or will we find a way to grow beyond it?

Meet Me in the Future *steers clear of the customary payoff: the glory. While ably satisfying the badass warrior trope, Hurley ultimately begs the question: Are we tired of this yet?*

Several of the stories in *Meet Me in the Future* make the a priori assumption that war and cruelty are inescapable in any gathering of humans. In the "The Red Secretary," catastrophic war occurs on a planet in regular 300-year intervals. Though inhabitants take draconian measures to create peace, they always



fail. Soldiers in "The Light Brigade" decimate cities for unexplained reasons. In the "Corpse Archives," post-singularity beings in synthetic bodies mutilate a native population out of jealousy for their unmarred flesh. In "Enyo-Enyo," a pilot meshes with an eponymous spacecraft that eats its crew over and over as they spiral through time.

In aggregate, these dark, pessimistic selections expose the not-so-glamorous underbelly of the rugged, war-making SFF protagonist. "The War of Heroes" puts it even more plainly. Through determined grit, an uncompromising thirst for revenge, and the willingness to sacrifice innocent blood, a woman from a rural village learns the art of high-tech warfare and thoroughly defeats an invading army. Before dying, the last invading power-suited soldier congratulates her: "A Hero is one who not only slays monsters, but creates monsters to slay. That is what we have done here. It's what you have become. A Hero. Now you, in turn will make Heroes of others."

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Do these stories reflect Hurley's lack of hope? Or her inability to imagine how else humans might organize themselves?

Arguably not. Hurley sprinkles other stories in *Meet Me in the Future* with tantalizing hints of what humanity could be. In "Elephants and Corpses," people can patronize a viral wizard to catch a cold and learn the language of the dead. An undying, body-snatching warrior sor-

cerer gives up awesome power to retire on a farm with his pet pig. In "When We Fall," organic spaceships transport humans throughout the galaxy. And a lonely orphan transient and a spaceship AI escape war and fall in love. In "The Sinners and the Sea," a generation lives in floating cities to rise above their ancestors' mistakes.

Even the darker stories have elements of optimism. In "The Light Brigade," people become time-traveling beams of light and zip across the planet in an instant. In "The Corpse Archives," humans travel to other worlds in manufactured bodies. In "Enyo-Enyo," consciousness and memory persist through iterative, spiraling journeys through time.

Rather than becoming mired in pessimism, *Meet Me in the Future* makes broader commentary about the work women have done and the work that remains in breaking down patriarchal barriers. The title of "Our Faces, Radiant Sisters, Our Faces Full of Light" looks back toward a 1976 story by Raccoona Sheldon (cyberpunk pioneer James Tiptree Jr.) about violence directed at women in a dystopian city. At the same time it looks forward to the work still going on. In Hurley's story, written a few months after the famous dismissal leveled at Senator Elizabeth Warren, a monster-slaying warrior's epitaph reads, "Nevertheless, she persisted."

Like scarred, jaded gunslingers coerced to one last stand, the characters in *Meet Me in the Future* slog through the muck of inherited wars, past sins, and colossal fuck-ups sometimes—and sometimes not—of their own making. Unlovely, perhaps, but undaunted.

Ancient humans used war to survive, to protect their food and their families from predation. In contrast, modern technological war, conquest, colonialism, and oppression are marching humans toward extinction. In counterpoint to the argument that the gritty warrior trope is the only reality, might the SFFH mirror just as truthfully reflect humanity's history of cooperation? Without generosity, family, community, and kindness, humanity would not have survived long enough to create its warriors.

Must every writer prove how violent, how hard-edged, how damaged their characters can be in order to earn a place in the pantheon of "real" or "serious" SFFH writers? If so, Hurley's protagonists are equal to any badass feted in the Hugo nominations of yore. Perhaps, like Hurley and her protagonists, the diverse voices of the genre still face a slog through the inherited muck of techno-warrior/patriarchy fiction. Yet, they will persist until we all arrive at a place in our collective culture where the protagonists who wage peace are not weaklings, sissies, or cowards. They are the badasses of a grown-up future.

I am not in general a fan of military fiction, nor do I usually go in for short story collections. That said, I could find little fault with *Meet Me in the Future*. Hurley is rigorous in her craft, eschewing the derivative. Each piece presents its own substantive, deeply wrought world, and each layered character struggles with internal and external conflict as not only an individual but also a member of a society and a species. Hurley's stories are not candy, but nutrient-dense mind food that stretches the imagination. *Cascadia Subduction Zone* readers who enjoy short fiction full of military action and visceral horror poured over a foundation of uncompromising feminism will find much to appreciate in Kameron Hurley's *Meet Me in the Future*.

[T]he characters in Meet Me in the Future *slog through the muck of inherited wars, past sins, and colossal fuck-ups sometimes—and sometimes not—of their own making.*

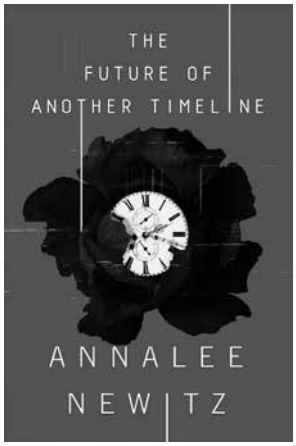
Hurley's stories are not candy, but nutrient-dense mind food that stretches the imagination.

Laura Gilliam has worked as an inner city English teacher, Peace Corps volunteer, small business accountant, and structural bodyworker. Lately, she's became convinced that the imagination of new possibilities is the key to substantive change and perhaps to sculpting us into true human beings. Thus, reading and writing speculative fiction continues to take up more and more of Laura's time. She lives in Seattle, WA, with her family.

Knitting Patterns for New Worlds

The Future of Another Timeline by Annalee Newitz, Tor Books, September 2019, 352 pp., $26.99

reviewed by Misha Stone



Hailed as a queer feminist, punk rock, time travel novel, this is a character-driven science fiction exploration of politics and power from the vantages of women who have lived their lives in a timeline without the right to choose bodily autonomy….

> Pay attention to the inventive arenas that exploit political power outside that stage or change the contents of the drama onstage.
>
> From the places you have been instructed to ignore or rendered unable to see come the stories that change the world, and it is here that culture has the power to shape politics and ordinary people have the power to change the world.
>
> —Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*

> Meanwhile the dream of time travel—for new presidents, literary journalists and writers alike—is just that: a dream. And one that only makes sense if the rights and privileges you are accorded currently were accorded to you back then, too. If some white men are more sentimental about history than anyone else right now, it's no big surprise: their rights and privileges stretch a long way back. For a black woman the expanse of livable history is so much shorter.
>
> —Zadie Smith, *Feel Free: Essays*

Small choices, small actions, and incremental changes gave us the timeline we currently occupy, with the rights and privileges we currently enjoy and the rights and privileges we still strive to achieve. The cumulative and granular nature of change makes it hard to see that change in real time as monumental shifts become part of the mainstream. What was once seismic becomes systemic, and time accrues behind and ahead of us, often imperceptible to us because we cannot travel through time. Journalist and editor Annalee Newitz's debut *Autonomous*, which won a Lambda Literary Award, features a queer main character whose adventures on the grift align with a story about anti-patent pharma and the rights of sentient AI. Their sophomore novel *The Future of Another Timeline* explores time travel, how hard it is to "edit" history, and how a dropped stitch can change the whole cloth. Hailed as a queer feminist, punk rock, time travel novel, this is a character-driven science fiction exploration of politics and power from the vantages of women who have lived their lives in a timeline without the right to choose bodily autonomy, in which men have seized and held power over women's bodies and fates through laws, moral high grounds, and the fear of social ostracism.

As with many time travel novels, there are several story strands showing various points in history from alternating perspectives. That does create some challenges in continuity for the reader; it can take a while to get to know the characters as they move through time and space. Stitching through multiple edits in the timeline, the action starts at a punk rock concert in 1992 Irvine, Alta California, where the feminist punk band Grape Ape takes central stage with its Latinx lead Glorious Garcia whipping the crowd into a fiercely rebellious chant of "SLUT SLUT SLUT!" This is a rallying cry of sexual liberation and reclamation, and Grape Ape's entire concert is a riotous call to action and a magnetic force for time travelers on both sides of the ideological divide. Tess, a geoscientist, has traveled from 2022 to this concert from her fraught youth for the Daughters of Harriet, a group of time travelers trying to wrest women's futures and fates from the hands and laws of auto-

Tess, a geoscientist, has traveled from 2022 to this concert from her fraught youth for the Daughters of Harriet, a group of time travelers trying to wrest women's futures and fates from the hands and laws of autocratic men.

cratic men. Tess surveys the scene at this pivotal concert, locates the men's rights activists called the Comstockers, aka the Vice Fighters, but is distracted from her mission of thwarting them by the dramas at the center of her teenage friend group. She finds herself not just embroiled in changing the politics of the future, but trying to reach the hearts and minds of young women so stifled by their timeline that they believe that extreme violence may be the only answer.

Tess is wrenched between the aimless '90s Irvine of her youth and the vibrant 1893 Chicago World's Fair, appearing among the risqué women of the Midway. The Daughters of Harriet are fighting a war of attrition, fighting against the mighty moralists and men's rights activists spawned by the moral rectitude of Anthony Comstock, a "special agent" of the Postal Service who ferreted out and harassed purveyors of anything he deemed "obscenity," whose stranglehold on cultural attitudes is ingrained in American history and politics. The Daughters of Harriet follow in the footsteps of Harriet Tubman, who in this timeline becomes a Senator shortly after women get the vote in 1870, shortly after slaves are freed, resulting in a backlash that prevents legalized abortion. The work of the Comstockers, men who claim their men's rights cause in his name and memory, takes many forms over the ages, from political pulpits to fringe online communities, but its aim is clear: curb and control women in order to control society and keep it in (white) man's image. Comstock's men want to destroy time travel to return to and secure a retrograde society. The Daughters want to secure an intersectional feminist future. Can the Daughters stop the Comstockers from destroying the Machines and make crucial edits in the timeline?

The Machines that enable time travel are hewn out of geology, mysterious consoles in rock formations at five points in the globe that open wormholes into the past. The race to edit the timeline and secure the future of rights for women and nonbinary people against patriarchal extremists, and the conflicting notions about means and ends form the heart of this novel about liberation and collective action. Tess is the locus around which the very nature of societal change and how it is achieved coalesces. She also discovers that as she visits her own past, her memory starts to schism, and she realizes that she remembers things from the past that have been erased in the future. When she returns to 2022 and discovers that her friend Berenice, a trans activist, has been killed by men hellbent on editing trans women out of history, Tess understands that her memory may just be the axis for the edits they need to make.

Feminist figures like Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons emerge as major actors in creating change, and their historical dispute on how change should best be won also animates Tess's personal and professional journey. The Daughters of Harriet are battling the backlash with scalpels and hammers, figuring out which tweaks will best result in securing women's futures. Tess tries to warn her childhood friend Beth, who is struggling with her family's toxic dynamics, about her friend Lizzy, whose penchant for violence may threaten Beth's own future.

Newitz renders the alternate history worlds of California in the 1990s and Chicago's 1890s artistic Midway milieu with vivid detail, dovetailing the potentials for monumental change and threat within the timeline across the century. The double helix of women's reproductive rights and universal suffrage align with more dire urgency when a woman emerges from a dark future where women are reproductive drones. The stakes are high as Tess and the Daughters struggle to beat the Comstockers at their own game, and the urgency of the need takes on emotional depth in the lives of Tess's friends in the California of the past. *The Future of Another Timeline* reminds us that the future is now, and that the people have the power and the responsibility to work towards a better future. Newitz delivers the queer feminist time travel novel that we need to envision that future, offering action and insight along the way.

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Newitz renders the alternate history worlds… with vivid detail, dovetailing the potentials for monumental change and threat within the timeline across the century.

Misha Stone is a librarian specializing in readers' advisory in Seattle. Stone serves on the Clarion West Writer's Workshop board and periodically teaches readers' advisory classes for the University of Washington's iSchool.

Small Rocks to Break the Current:
The Theology of the Sisters of the Order of Saint Rita

Sisters of the Vast Black by Lina Rather, Tor.com, October 2019, 160 pp., $16.99

reviewed by Joanne Rixon

Sisters of the Vast Black *is…set in a future where humans populate several star systems, against a backdrop of postwar independence for the fragile colonies and a battered-but-resurgent Earth Central Government—and a new Pope.*

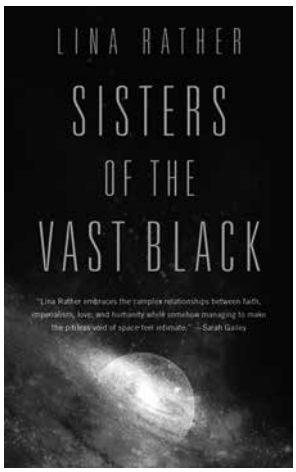
Imagine: a creature bigger than a blue whale floating in the vast dark between the stars, impervious to vacuum, the descendent of one of Earth's stranger invertebrates. Imagine: a living spaceship, big enough to carry ten humans within its chambered form, genetically engineered to provide life support and transportation for those humans. Imagine it colorful, and wet, and moving. Imagine it, for want of a better term, in love.

This creature is *Our Lady of Impossible Constellations*, and the Sisters of the Order of Saint Rita, who live within it, are on a mission. The nuns travel the frontiers of human exploration, between moons and space stations, and minister to their scattered flock's spiritual and physical needs.

Sisters of the Vast Black is a debut novella by short-story author Lina Rather and one of the fantastic recent run of novellas from Tor.com. It's set in a future where humans populate several star systems, against a backdrop of postwar independence for the fragile colonies and a battered-but-resurgent Earth Central Government—and a new Pope.

It fits neatly in the small but punchy subgenre, which includes Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* and Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, of science fiction books that are explicitly Catholic, that encounter questions within that traditional theological canon, rather than scientific questions.

The book begins with a theological conundrum: should a living spaceship that has been consecrated as a convent, so that it is holy ground fit for celibate religious women, be permitted to have sex and procreate, or should it be kept celibate like the Sisters themselves? We meet the Sisters through their approaches to this question: mysticism, adherence to tradition and trust in authority, scientific interest, complicated and murky personal hopes and fears.



The scope of the theological difficulty doesn't remain limited to the esoteric question of the celibacy of living convents, though. That question turns out to be one instance of a much larger conundrum: the tension between the relational, human aspects of religion and the abstract, legalistic aspects. The book goes so far as to ask whether it is necessary to be a believer in order to be a saint—or if all it takes is reaching out your hand to another person who needs your help.

Although this book is about what shape faith takes, it's accessible to non-religious readers. We never learn about the ship's namesake impossible constellations, and there isn't much space devoted to creeds or catechisms. The tenets of the Order of Saint Rita are never established in detail, and the rules we do learn, like the restriction that keeps any of the nuns from hearing confession, are broken based on personal loyalties; they don't worry about scripture, or exegesis, or even praying to confirm in their spirits that God is with them.

Rather's disinterest in putting the religion on the page also means the Church of the far, space-faring future reads basically the same as the Church today. There's no sign of theological evolution since the invention of living spaceships, the colonization of space, or a catastrophic, nearly species-ending war

There's no sign of theological evolution since the invention of living spaceships, the colonization of space, or a catastrophic, nearly species-ending war that devastated Earth and severed political ties between Earth and her colonies.

that devastated Earth and severed political ties between Earth and her colonies. Historically, Catholicism has evolved dramatically in both form and essence when political pressures have taken the Church beyond its borders, and this lack felt like a missed opportunity.

This is especially noticeable when the new priest arrives from Rome. Rome is still the center of the Church, and the priest is a representative of all that is hierarchical and imperial, down to his Earth Central Government-branded Bibles. The Sisters, in contrast, make decisions by consensus and care more about healing bodies than saving souls.

During the book's climax, there's a dispute between the priest and the nuns, who by this point have solidly allied together. This is one of the only times we see Scripture quoted in the book: Sister Faustina asks, "Have you forgotten Matthew?... 'And proclaim as you go, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.'"

The priest replies with, "Render onto Caesar that which is Caesar's" (sic), which isn't actually a particularly appropriate verse for the argument they're having. Second Peter 2:13 instructs the faithful to "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority." Or there's the more well-known Romans 13: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."

This debate between service and obedience has been around since at least the first Christian writings, but Rather doesn't access this history of tension between factions of the Church. She also doesn't tie the conflict into a new technology or discovery in the far edges of human space.

Instead it's presented as a series of personality clashes, and so in some ways the whole thing is superficial. The priest is, from the beginning, set up as rather loathsome, and the Sisters unanimously agree that he's obviously wrong. He's summarily disposed of, and the nuns carry on toward their goal of helping a group of vulnerable people. The book assumes a moral standard, but is uninterested in showing its work.

Maybe this isn't a weakness. Maybe the lack of theology is an argument itself: the intricacies of the theology don't actually matter. What matters is these women risking their lives to minister to strangers. Stories of heroes behaving heroically are an argument that doesn't go in circles, and not every book about Catholics in Space needs to be *The Sparrow*.

Maybe the lack of theology is an argument itself: the intricacies of the theology don't actually matter. What matters is these women risking their lives to minister to strangers.

Besides, if the Order has no clear theology, the Sisters themselves do. The leading duo among the nuns begin the narrative as paired opposites: initially Lucia is so full of faith that she trips over into naiveté, while in contrast Faustina is more devoted to the practicalities of life than to Christ. By the end of the book, both have confronted the weaknesses of their beginning positions and complicated them.

Lucia's faith is shaken when she learns the Reverend Mother, whom she loves and respects, has a past full of horrifying sins. Faustina's doubt is also shaken, by a moment of divine clarity and inspiration when she is at her most desperate, trying to save another human being.

Sisters' actual plot has huge holes in it. The science is impossible both on the biology and crowd psychology fronts, and it felt throughout like it should have been told on a much larger scale than that of ten nuns, one priest, and thirty colonists. You could just as easily analyze this book as a successor to *Firefly* as *The Sparrow*—and that analysis would probably be less flattering to *Sisters*.

However. The moment feels right for this book, with its message that the world is hard and people often do evil, but we can choose to care for each other. Author Elly Bangs recently wrote in an online conversation: "the world is a party bus barreling straight for the edge of the grand fucking canyon, and we keep taking a vote as to how to drive it, this screaming smoking death machine drowning in cigarette ash and disco ball light, and the votes keep coming back PEDAL TO THE METAL! and WOOOO! and there is no emergency exit, no windows we can pop out."

The moment feels right for this book, with its message that the world is hard and people often do evil, but we can choose to care for each other.

In this world, as the edge of the canyon approaches, the ending benediction

Cont. on p. 20

Sisters of the Order (cont. from p. 19)

This is a theology. Not one built on a church's traditions or texts; it doesn't require a belief in God. It only requires a belief in human beings.

of *Sisters* is a great comfort: "they both knew it was the end of a great and glorious and innocent time. They knew what they could not forget; they had done what they could not undo. For now they would take a breath but very soon Central Governance would come calling, and the universe would change once more. There would be blood spilled again, across worlds and worlds, there might be war, or plague. And the universe would need them to do what small good things they could, even in the face of that which they could not stop. If all they could be were small rocks to break the current, it would have to be enough."

This is a theology. Not one built on a church's traditions or texts; it doesn't require a belief in God. It only requires a belief in human beings. And so the book answers the question: yes, one who doubts can be a saint. Yes, connection with other living beings is more important than obedience. The glorious living ship does not live all the way to the end of the story—but it has a chance to have relations with its lover, and it leaves behind children in the care of the Sisters, children who are growing up in order to care for the Sisters in their turn, into the future, *per omnia saecula saeculorum*. Amen.

Joanne Rixon lives in the shadow of an active volcano with a rescue chihuahua named after a dinosaur and is an organizer with the North Seattle Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Meetup. Her poetry has appeared in *GlitterShip* and her short speculative fiction in venues including *Terraform*, *Fireside*, and *Liminal Stories*.

Gifts of Gods and Men

by A.L. Blacklyn

Hephaestus makes me
from the lands in the sky.
Zeus calls me, Woman,
and gifts arrive on sleds
launched from Olympus Mons.

Titanic Epimetheus, husband,
Another gift, climbs up—
Or am I given?
Either way, we exchange
Many presents to bear.

Silver threads, golden rings,
flowers, needles, talents,
stories of truths and lies,
but no sense of whispers
Zeus jarred to drop responsibility.

Unlidded, fearful screams form.
Silver and gold bloodied,
heads rot beneath flowers
until the men cry, "Oh, evil woman!"
Gods' cruel present sinks.

A.L. Blacklyn is unfortunately inclined toward adventure but strives to learn from each experience. On the best days, this writer sits in the shade of woodlands to weave together poetry, prose, and lyrics. See more of Blacklyn's writings at shadowsinmind.net.

Penned By My Hand

by Colleen Anderson

I entered disguised to give her final test
no threat, she crouched, clasped in iron
her hidden truths torn out
We now waited for confession

A sword no more can kill
nor a pen can write
She laughed a spray
of blood and teeth

My fingers crossed to save my soul
her glare as searing as the brands
used to bare the secrets she hoarded

A child cannot be a wren
but can sing like one
She hawked up frothy pink
You're not one of us

I cautiously asked
You mean a witch?
Did she hex?

My feet retreated from her spittle
I brushed dirt and rat droppings
from meticulously tattered robes

Look around and you tell me
A carpet cannot weave its pattern
Her eyes shuttered like an owl's
It is your hand that holds the pen

Riddles
was she working magic?

Then why on God's earth
did she not charm away her pain?

Broken Words

by Colleen Anderson

How can she taste the morning dew
when gore pools where her tongue once lived?

Earth's soft richness
slips from bloodied fingers

Blood and soil form red clay
Silence is mortared into the soul

How can she hear the breeze shake leaves
when needles pierce eardrums with silence?

The crisp relief of flowing water
cannot soothe feet caressed by blades

Needles for sewing stitch words
and secrets into the flesh

How can she plead with trees that once knew her
when branches are clubs that come for her head?

The forest forgets she plucked sweet comfrey
as her fingers become twigs for the fire

Nests lie abandoned and burrows unfilled
friend watches friend with an eye for the odd
Wood is gathered but not to heat food
the forest forms walls to hide human purpose

Women stand still, fear freezing their mouths.
Power forms the bond that shackles her wrists.

Who will hear her words now that her body is broken?
The living won't talk and only hear what they wish.

Spinning Wheel

by Colleen Anderson

Her handprint is upon
this wheel
I touch the coarse-gritted furrows
sift through bones, ripening seeds

The wheel turns
shadowed indentations
where her fingers pressed
faintest tender green reaches
toward the sun

She spins the wheel
around its center
I kneel, press my nose into
moist soil, rainbow blooms
musty decay, tangy aromas
entwine within me

She pulls the wheel
through the season
I lick at fruity nectar
sliding down my throat
it fills me with light
I do not eat the bruises
push them back into the earth

I hear the wheel
grinding onward
turning lightly rhythmic rumbling
her voice silently whispers
there are no words
for that which is beyond
words
she shows me as I roll

Upon this wheel
this turning earth
I will grow and die
and learn to live again

Colleen Anderson's work has appeared in such publications as *Polu Texni, On Spec, Thrilling Words* and *Nameless*. *A Body of Work* was published by Black Shuck Books. She will be 2020 Creative Ink Festival guest of honor in Vancouver, BC.

"Oddkin"
Ruby Rae Jones

I am a queer artist living on Whidbey Island in Washington State. My ongoing research is centered around global and local environmental concerns, relationships, trauma, sexuality, and magic. The unique ecosystems and nonhuman inhabitants of the Salish Sea have always been a major source of inspiration for my work in sculpture, painting and drawing, printmaking, and performance.

I identify strongly as an interdisciplinary artist. My early work consisted of paintings and drawings, but a few years ago my brushstrokes began to pull away from the canvas and carve into it, until they finally jumped out sturdily into the three-dimensional realm. I found a love for sculpture that continued through my final year at Western Washington University, during which I created my thesis project, "Oddkin."

"Oddkin" comprises three large mixed media sculptures that offered me the opportunity to find fluency in a number of processes, including bronze casting, body casting, collecting, slip-casting clay, woodworking, sewing, and more.

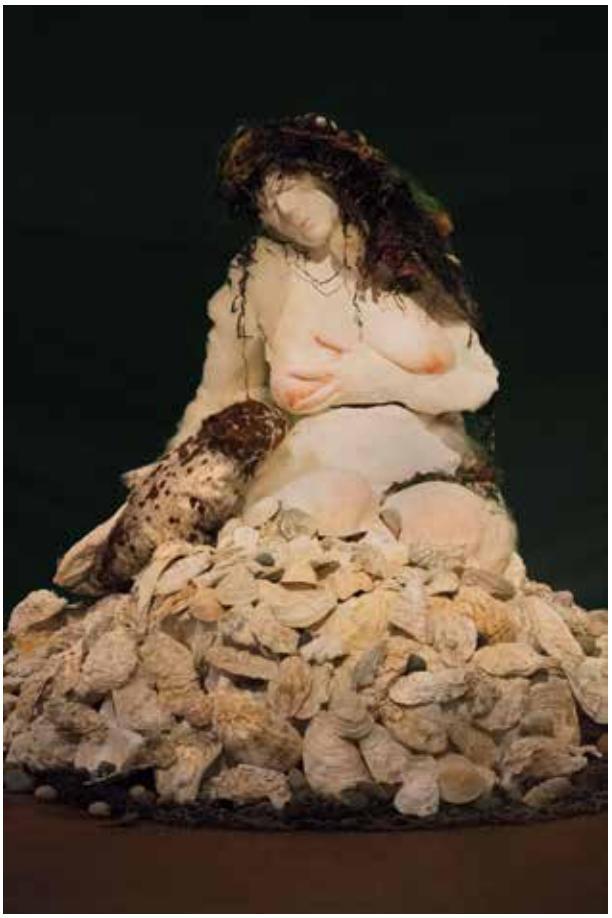
Conceptually, my sculptures create a site to process, grieve, and contend with the reality of ecological degradation across the globe, and the major extinction event that we are now experiencing. I use cast human body parts in combination with the forms of other-than-humans. Each mélange repositions the human as one component of an ecosystem, giving and receiving in acts of radical collaboration with companion species. "Oddkin" opens a conversation about how material technology has shaped our environment since the emergence of human culture and how it has altered our relationships to all other living beings. The materials I employ—clay, cast metal, wood, and plaster—speak to that history and collapse it into a rich present. In conversation with one another, the materials begin to embody the complexity and cooperative nature of an ecosystem.

The concept that there is a limitless and pristine resource called "nature" that exists outside the human world allows the global capitalist-imperialist system to flourish, compelling societies to exploit and consume to the point of genocide and environmental collapse. Eschewing the concept of an externalized nature and challenging humanistic associations with motherhood, my work highlights kinship with other forms of life.

The Selkie

Oddkin: Cradle

Otters



Oddkin: Cradle

Cormorants

The Orange Tree

Oddkin: Brood

$5.00

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