

The

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Crackling Arbutus



Cheryl Richey

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## Asking the Wrong Questions: Alice Sheldon, the Gender Learning Curve, and Me

by L. Timmel Duchamp

1.

It's 1982. I'm reading Racoon B. Sheldon's "Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light" for the first time: "Hot summer night, big raindrops falling faster now as she swings along the concrete expressway, high over the old dead city. Lightning is sizzling and cracking over the lake behind her" (149). Instantly I'm in a Delanyscape, a cross between *Dahlgren* and *The Fall of the Towers* trilogy. The first two sentences of the second paragraph confirm this location in my imagination: "She's passing a great billboard-thing dangling and banging in the wind. Part of a big grinning face: O-N-D-E-R-B-R-E-A, whatever that was, bright as day" (149). By the fifth paragraph, I realize that laid over the Delanyscape are elements of 1970s feminist utopias—couriers, "sisters," Native American names, and wisdom.

In the second section, two cops in a cruiser present a different view of the same scene. Are we in alternate timelines? I wonder. Or is this scene set in the past, when the "dead city" was alive? The section is short; the third is too, with a brief return to the "courier" that adds nothing new to the story. The fourth section, though, switches to a conversation between a mother and daughter about an encounter the mother and her husband have just had with a hitchhiker, whom we by now feel certain is the "courier." The daughter suggests that the hitchhiker was stoned, and the mother and the daughter conclude their conversation by emphatically agreeing that the hitchhiker is "just asking for it" (154). By the next scene, which returns to the "courier," every detail of the "courier's" perception screams at us that she's either hallucinating or delusional. The following scene, though, makes it a wrap: the "courier" is fingered by a man named Don—who just happens to share a name with the narrator in Tiptree's "The Women Men Don't See"—as someone who's had electroconvulsive shock therapy and somehow managed to escape her minders. The section ends with Don's nameless wife remarking on how "happy and free" and

"fun" the mental patient was, and Don replying "That's the sick part, honey" (156).

By the time the delusive/drugged mental patient thesis has been confirmed by the woman's doctor and young husband (and later by her father), we know this story is not science fiction, but an allegory of the it-was-all-a-dream (or daydream or nightmare or drug fantasy) ilk. The courier vanishes—becomes as much a ghost to the reader as the "dead city" was to the courier—and a cipher takes her place. As a person, she exists less even than the nameless other wives in the story. The only woman in the story who actually has a name is a "young policewoman" (164), Officer O'Hara, the honorary male who is Officer Alioto's partner on a stakeout. Officer O'Hara reports, when asked, that yes, she saw the young woman—whom she first characterizes as "some little tramp" (164) and then as "a spoiled brat if you ask me" (164)—pass by, followed closely by the four men who were known to have subsequently attacked her. "Who does she think she is, running on the street at night?" (164). O'Hara demands. The story ends with the "spoiled brat's" last deluded perceptions as she's raped and killed.

In her 1981 "Recent Feminist Utopias," Joanna Russ includes "Your Faces" on her list of utopian fiction published in the 1970s, and describes it thus: "[A] madwoman, who believes she is living in a future, all-female utopia, is raped and murdered by a male gang in a city at night" (140). Russ writes: "I believe the separatism is primary, and that the authors are not subtle in their reasons for creating separatist utopias: if men are kept out of these societies, it is because men are dangerous. They also hog all the good things of the world" (140). Although Russ doesn't explicitly say so, we can infer that she reads the nameless protagonist's "mad" visions as representing utopia, side by side with the depiction of the reasons men need to be excluded from feminist utopian visions. For Russ, the protagonist's "madness" does not invalidate her visions; rather, the attitudes and responses of Don et al. merely reveal

*It's 1982. I'm reading Racoon B. Sheldon's "Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light" for the first time: "Hot summer night, big raindrops falling faster now as she swings along the concrete expressway, high over the old dead city. Lightning is sizzling and cracking over the lake behind her" (149). Instantly I'm in a Delanyscape, a cross between Dahlgren and The Fall of the Towers trilogy.*

*"Who does she think she is, running on the street at night?" (164). O'Hara demands. The story ends with the "spoiled brat's" last deluded perceptions as she's raped and killed.*

Cont. on p. 2



## Asking the Wrong Questions (cont. from p. 1)

*For years I resisted reading the story as allegory—as a didactic narrative designed to teach a particular lesson. Science fiction readers don't like allegories, because allegories are moral dicta coated with the trappings of non-realist elements.*

Reading generously each time I read "Your Faces," I invented new relations between the "courier's" sections and the harsh, critical social perceptions intended to represent "reality."

*The reason women can't have "the good things of the world," as Russ put it, isn't, for Sheldon, men and the danger they pose to women. It's women themselves.*

the ugliness and danger for women in ordinary male-dominated society.

For years I resisted reading the story as allegory—as a didactic narrative designed to teach a particular lesson. Science fiction readers don't like allegories, because allegories are moral dicta coated with the trappings of non-realist elements. Allegories don't actually ask you to suspend your disbelief, since all their non-realist elements are there only to serve a didactic purpose; the anti-realist elements in allegories actually constrict rather than expand your imagination, keeping them lined up along the straight and narrow road of its lesson. Thus, for most science fiction and fantasy readers, they're dry and stale and claustrophobic. Reading generously each time I read "Your Faces," I invented new relations between the "courier's" sections and the harsh, critical social perceptions intended to represent "reality." To do this, I drew on the narrative forms of a variety of science fiction stories pitting one "reality" against another, or juxtaposing two parallel realities. But my attempts to read the story as science fiction ceased after I read Julie Phillips' *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*. After that, I knew in my heart that "Your Faces" was a cry of rage, frustration, and denial, directed at women in general and feminists in particular. As Phillips notes, "'Your Faces' is extremely bitter about women. Over and over, it's women who refuse to help the nameless (!) girl." Although her madness, for Russ, was not a deficit, for Sheldon it clearly was. The patronizing pity (or blatant rapaciousness) of the male characters might be a conceptual element that need not destroy the protagonist's dreams of feminist utopia, but the savagery and disavowal of the women characters is something else. The reason women can't have "the good things of the world," as Russ put it, isn't, for Sheldon, men and the danger they pose to women. It's women themselves.

### 2.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* (267). In the introduction to that book, she also wrote: "The biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities

that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro. Science regards any characteristic as a reaction dependant in part upon a *situation*" (xiv). Was that true in France when she wrote those words in the 1940s? It certainly wasn't true for the biological and social sciences in the US. Beauvoir is still able to refer to "woman," "the Jew," and "the Negro." Surely the very notion of "woman" demonstrates essentialism. Sometime over the course of the last four decades, such usage seems to have been dropped from US speech, perhaps around the same time that people started substituting the word "gender" for certain uses of the word "sex." I don't, of course, mean to suggest that such discursive shifts necessarily indicate a new clarity in thought, merely that certain usages go out of fashion and then begin to sound wrong for reasons few people will trouble to think about.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1970s I was in my twenties and a newly engaged feminist, reading Beauvoir, yes (in 1974, not entirely comprehending everything in *The Second Sex* and finding it something of a downer), but also Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1970) and, later in the decade, Gayle Rubin's powerful, influential "The Traffic in Women" (1975) and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). I entered the decade operating with the categories with which I'd been inculcated during the first twenty years of my life; I necessarily began with a confused mishmash of ideas that didn't sit well with the received—static, essentialist—categories.<sup>2</sup> I have a vivid memory of getting into a loud, vociferous argument while traveling with my partner Tom and another couple by car to Louisiana over spring break in 1970, in which I attempted to insist that women were not "illogical." At first the other woman, Susan, had sided with me; but the men drowned us out with their louder voices, and Tom remarked that he *liked* my being "so emotional" (and hence illogical), and Susan eventually shifted position, saying women possessed a *different* kind of logic, one based on "intuition." I had no notion then that the key to the argument would have been to refuse the validity of generalizing about women in that way. Learning generalizations about males and females and seeing the world as divided between boys and girls, men and



women (like in the want ads and public restrooms) had been one of the fundamental orderings of my socialization. Add to that, if I'd claimed that men were as emotional as women are, I'd have been raising questions about my interlocutors' masculinity, which was taboo. Generalizations about gender, back then, were always loaded with assumptions about sexuality.

Another, more subtle example of my confusion manifested in the course of my research for a long seminar paper on ideas of and attitudes toward sexuality in pre-modern Europe. While I was continually surprised to see how non-uniform such ideas and attitudes were from one geographical location to another, I sought to establish a base of shared ideas about menstruation, childbirth, breastfeeding, and conception. The only wholly common idea I found across Europe and through the centuries was the underlying assumption that women were polluted and disabled by their sexual physiology. Perhaps it is understandable, then, that I was particularly fascinated by the recurring idea that women could become men and be freed of their sexual physiology by particular practices and behaviors. Some early medieval religious believed that women who lived ascetic, spiritual lives—continually fasting and praying—could become “like men”—the proof of which was their ceasing to menstruate. I read this as an effect of anorexia nervosa (which more than one medieval historian would come to explore)—and a disavowal of womanhood. Disavowing and denying one's sex by adopting masculine behavior and dress as so many women did throughout European history, given pre-modern ideas about women that made them ineligible for the priesthood and frequently disqualified them from juries and made their legal testimony dubious, may have solved a lot of practical problems for individual women. But it wasn't feminist.

Likely Gayle Rubin's “Traffic” did more to clarify my thinking about sex and gender than any other piece of writing. I read it several times through the years, but it made the greatest difference to me in 1981/1982, in the months when I was grappling with confusion engendered by *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1980).

This anthology compiled numerous pieces of writings, some of them with sharply divergent notions not only of feminism but also of women—and *woman* and *the feminine*. “Woman” was a word that appeared often in the anthology, and my awareness that it was used as the English equivalent of *femme*, which in French means “wife,” exacerbated my discomfort with the repeated invocation of “the feminine.” I had only begun to think about narrative and discourse in the mid-1970s, and the idea of “woman” as an instrument and product of discourse was foreign to me. It took me some time to work out that “the feminine” (which Hélène Cixous in particular celebrates) denoted a quality that men like Proust, Celine, and Joyce were held to possess, rather than anything to do with women.<sup>3</sup> Actual women, I gradually worked out, for some of the French “feminists,” could either speak “the father's” words or rage hysterically in protest to the language and symbolic system that not only did not but could not represent them. Granted, a few feminists in the book were of Monique Wittig's ilk, refusing to hear their own voices as either irrational or controlled by the patriarchy. In my first encounter with the book, I read it as crying out for feminist revolution.

At the time I first encountered *New French Feminisms*, my friend Lois and I shared books back and forth; Lois gave me Grace Paley, Audre Lorde, Marilyn French, and Katherine Anne Porter, I gave her Joanna Russ, Monique Wittig, Marge Piercy, Suzy McKee Charnas, Octavia E. Butler, Vonda N. McIntyre, and a lot of feminist theory. We'd meet to exchange books and talk, in fine weather walking to a park and sitting in the grass, in bad weather hanging out in a cafe. I confessed my confusion to her. On the one hand, I was fascinated by the idea of drawing on the rage and pain of subordination and injustice and loved the idea of making something positive out of so much negative. (By then, Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* had been at work in me for almost ten years.) On the other hand, I could see from the changes that were taking place in myself and other women that building on the parts of myself that were damaged and stunted seemed a regressive thing to do. What ought my fiction to be? What ought its aim to be? And

*I had only begun to think about narrative and discourse in the mid-1970s, and the idea of “woman” as an instrument and product of discourse was foreign to me.*

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Cont. on p. 4



## Asking the Wrong Questions (cont. from p. 3)

*I could see from the changes that were taking place in myself and other women that building on the parts of myself that were damaged and stunted seemed a regressive thing to do. What ought my fiction to be? What ought its aim to be? And what happens when women have liberated themselves? Are we supposed to go on valorizing the parts of ourselves that are the result of inculcated subordination?*

what happens when women have liberated themselves? Are we supposed to go on valorizing the parts of ourselves that are the result of inculcated subordination?

The issue crystalized for me in a single, emotionally devastating moment. It occurred during a women's music concert that Tom, Kath, Lois, and I attended together. The chorus of one of the last songs included the line "I'm so glad to be a woman," expressing a common sentiment of second-wave cultural feminism. The performers asked the audience to sing along with them. After one or two iterations of the line, I felt myself split off from everyone around me. Why are we singing these words? What do they mean? Am I glad I menstruate and suffer painful cramps for three days out of twenty-eight? Glad I get harassed when I walk down the street? Glad I'm discriminated against at the bank? Glad that so many men were always telling me to lighten up and stop taking myself so seriously? Perhaps I hadn't realized it before, but at that moment it seemed that those were the things that constituted my being a woman. Everything else about me I saw as simply human. Is being glad one is a woman what feminism is really all about?

At that moment, I felt certain it wasn't.

### 3.

Alice Sheldon was born in 1915, my mother in 1929, and I in 1950. Although there were fourteen years' difference between Alice Sheldon and my mother, and an even greater class difference, in some respects Julie Phillips' portrait of Sheldon's ambivalence about women and feminism reminds me strongly of my mother's ambivalence about women and feminism, and even offers me clues about my mother's conflicted feelings about being a woman. When in her thirties my mother had her uterus and ovaries removed, she began to worry about whether or not she was still a "real" woman. I first heard this in my teens and thought it was silly. How could anyone with large breasts and a vagina not be a "real woman"? How could someone who had given birth to three children not be a "real woman"? My mother took hormones to replace the ones her body no longer produced. Hormones, I was told,

had a lot to do with one's sex. My parents informed me, during dinner table conversations, that many women participating in the Olympics weren't "real women" because the hormones they took made them more like men than women (though that didn't mean they were really "men"). Later, during a college break in early 1969, my mother privately made a few comments designed to warn me off any lesbians I might meet by mentioning how when she came as a young woman from "back east" to Chicago, hoping to start a career in journalism, she'd joined a softball league because she'd always been a tomboy—only to find herself playing almost entirely with "bulldykes." Her womanliness, she believed, would have been threatened if she hadn't quit the league. I can't say I understood her. At least five of the women I hung out with in the School of Music were lesbians, and the idea that they weren't "real women" seemed ludicrous to me. I didn't get that linkage of sexuality with sex (or, as we'd later say, gender). Until the late 1980s, I assumed that sex (as opposed to gender) was either/or. The hermaphrodite was imaginary, and I had yet to discover the existence of the intersex.

As for my mother's ambivalence toward feminism: I assumed it had mostly to do with her intrinsic mistrust of women. Sometimes she'd link herself to me, in conversation, as a feminist and see herself as a trailblazer. This was particularly the case following occasions on which she'd been professionally humiliated simply because she was a woman, for instance, at trade conventions that rather than acknowledging her as comptroller (basically the CFO of the two companies she built into thriving corporations) named her the companies' presidents' "Girl Friday"—even in some cases refusing to allow her admission to the (all-male) conventions. At such moments, being an exceptional woman did not, as it often did, make her an honorary male. At other times she'd "explain" to me how weak women are, how she'd never been able to stand to work for them. Though she didn't say it, the unspoken question was how could anyone want to change the position of women in the world, given how awful they were? What complicated the issue for both of us was that she and my father had switched some

*Julie Phillips' portrait of Sheldon's ambivalence about women and feminism reminds me strongly of my mother's ambivalence about women and feminism*



of the conventional sex roles (as they were then called) between them. My father was better at cooking and childcare than she; she understood finances better, so she handled the family's finances; she was also a better breadwinner than he. Though the family adapted to the former (raising some eyebrows and making my mother feel inadequate as "a woman"), the problem with comparisons between their paychecks was solved only by having her boss carefully keep her own salary below my father's, far below the salary appropriate for her job title and description. I originally assumed she did this to preserve my father's masculine pride. Only later did I realize, through remarks she made later in life, that she took a lower salary than offered as much to preserve her own sense of femininity as my father's sense of masculinity. Her sense of inadequacy at home-making indubitably contributed to her fears that she was not a "real woman."

Alice Sheldon seems not to have worried about whether or not she was a "real woman"; she wrote to Joanna Russ in 1980 that "I am a Lesbian—or at least as close as one can come to being one never having had a successful love with any of the women I've loved" (Russ, *The Country* 291). "Tip"—James Tiptree Jr.—was an important part of her persona, and Tip's masculine identity arguably enabled her ability to write fiction.<sup>4</sup> In Phillips' reading, Sheldon's reservations about feminism had as much to do with her belief that feminism would demand that she give up the masculine identity that enabled her to write—the part of herself represented by "Tip"—as with her belief that women were too weak and divided to sustain liberation.

In short, Sheldon wanted no part of what I in the early 1980s heard in the words "I'm so glad to be a woman." If masculinity and femininity are, as she believed, biologically determined, then feminism could only be based on certain unchangeable qualities inborn in women.<sup>5</sup> She saw herself as an exception, as someone who contained within herself both masculine and feminine qualities, but since she was an exception, being a woman would mean giving up her own, unique mix. My mother often thought of herself as an exception, given her professional success in

an ordinarily exclusively male position of influence and dominance. But such exceptionality made her anxious about her sex and gender identification. While she shared some of Sheldon's attitudes toward feminism, I think she was more open to identifying herself as a feminist precisely because it helped allay her fear that she might not be a "real woman."

4.

Perhaps the most striking difference in the way I read "Your Faces" now from the way I read it through the 1990s is my recognition of its uncompromising depiction of rape culture. Women, of course, aren't the only problem in "Your Faces." A gang of men, after all, commit the rape, and the sympathetic men feel pity for rather than indignation on behalf of the nameless victim/courier (victim in the realistic part of the narrative, courier boldly facing down a pack of dogs in the delusive part of the narrative). The women's complicit condemnation of the victim/courier marks them as supporters of the rape culture that considers rape natural—something men will do whenever women step over the line and "ask for it," as Don's wife self-righteously puts it. How significant is it that the only woman allowed to have a name in the story is the cop who betrays her sense of schadenfreude that this "spoiled brat" will soon be under attack by the men she sees following the courier/victim? Officer O'Hara wears the badge of the ultimate patriarchal authority (at least in 1970s terms, when very few women were allowed entry into the ranks of police officers); she is obviously trying to efface any identification that might be made between her and the victim. If a woman is going about as a woman on her own at night, unauthorized, then she's crossed the line into unauthorized behavior. O'Hara's rhetorical question "Who does she think she is?" implies that the courier/victim has assumed a right or privilege women cannot grant to themselves but must be accorded by special license: if she's out on the street she must either be accompanied by a Real Man or be wearing a badge furnished by The Man. Any woman on her own without patriarchal authorization has broken the unwrit-

*Alice Sheldon seems not to have worried about whether or not she was a "real woman..."*

*Perhaps the most striking difference in the way I read "Your Faces" now from the way I read it through the 1990s is my recognition of its uncompromising depiction of rape culture.*

*Cont. on p. 6*



## Asking the Wrong Questions (cont. from p. 5)

*The question for Sheldon, Phillips writes, "Will becoming a woman mean having to kill off half of myself?" (312). Such a question strikes me as unutterably tragic, because today, in 2013, when so many people have refused and renounced the validity of biological essentialism, it sounds misbegotten.*

*...the single crack in the story's heavily armored realism appears when Don's wife says "She seemed so, I don't know. Happy and free. She—she was fun" (156). For a moment, Don's nameless wife glimpses the courier's world—or what it might be like to live in a world sans rape culture.*

ten law and must expect to be punished if and when she's caught by Real Men.

In "The Women Men Don't See," published three years before "Your Faces," Sheldon writing as Tiptree has her character Ruth Parsons remark about feminists, "Women have no rights, Don, except what men allow us. Men are more aggressive and powerful, and they run the world. When the next real crisis upsets them, our so-called rights will vanish like—like that smoke. We'll be back where we always were: property" (140). This formulation encapsulates a significant part of Sheldon's attitude toward feminism: to the extent that feminists view sexual dimorphism in essentialist terms, they are correct; but they are wrong to think that feminism can ever succeed, precisely because men's essential nature will rise to the fore and return sex roles (i.e., what we in the twenty-first century call "gender roles") to their "natural" state, with men on top and women thoroughly subordinated.

Sheldon's arguably most feminist story (written as Tiptree), "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" appeared the same year as "Your Faces." Phillips quotes David Gerrold's comments that "Houston" is "a feminist ideology story gone sour. All men are bad, all women are wonderful, so the answer is to kill all the men" (312). The characterization is exaggerated, but the story's underlying biological essentialism is stark (as in many of Tiptree's stories). Phillips remarks that the sympathetic male in the story, Orren Lorimer, "is so very much like James Tiptree, Jr. In a feminist world, what are women going to do with him? And Lorimer, like Don Fenton or Aaron Kaye, might be the side of Alli that can cope and bear things. Now he too must go with the women, and suffer. Alli felt she ought to want to be a woman, and was often angry with men" (312). The question for Sheldon, Phillips writes, "Will becoming a woman mean having to kill off half of myself?" (312).

Such a question strikes me as unutterably tragic, because today, in 2013, when so many people have refused and renounced the validity of biological essentialism, it sounds misbegotten. And Phillips's perceptive remark that Orren Lorimer and Don Fenton represent "the side of Alli that can cope and bear things" makes me

think that the reason all the women in "Your Faces" but O'Hara are nameless is precisely because "the women" are helpless and can't cope on their own. The question "Will becoming a woman mean having to kill off half of myself" reminds me of the months I spent grappling with what I saw as the embrace of essentialism in "French feminism" and its determination to celebrate, without reservation, everything perceived as "feminine."

In my current, sadder reading of "Your Faces," the single crack in the story's heavily armored realism appears when Don's wife says "She seemed so, I don't know. Happy and free. She—she was *fun*" (156). For a moment, Don's nameless wife glimpses the courier's world—or what it might be like to live in a world *sans* rape culture. And what does Don reply to this perception of feminist possibility? "That's the sick part, honey" (ibid).

Don is likely the character in the story Sheldon most closely identified with, though presumably Sheldon's own struggle with depression helped create the picture she limns of a young wife being treated with drugs and electroshock therapy, lost in the world she has imaginatively created. Her feminist vision, which Russ identifies as a feminist utopia, a vision that produces happiness and a sense of freedom, is what Don condemns as "the sick part." For someone like Don, the only sane thing, in other words, is refusing feminism. For me, Don's saying that is the *sad* part.

Something about Alice Sheldon and the fascinating cauldron of ideas and experience I associate with her seem to have developed in me a habit of imagining alternate outcomes for her life and work. I find myself wondering now what would have happened had she lived long enough to experience the shift away from biological determinism and the repudiation, by most US feminists, of essentialism.<sup>6</sup> Would she have been able to start thinking of herself in association with "the women," especially when they increasingly began to include men in the ranks of feminists? I'd like to think so.





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- 5 Alice Sheldon explicitly addresses her take on sexual dimorphism in the famous *Khatru* Symposium on Women in Science Fiction (1975 and 1993). Writing as Tiptree, she declares in “With Tiptree through the Great Sex Middle” that the X and Y chromosomes govern not sex, but two forms of “patterning”—male patterning and mother patterning. Joanna Russ notes that she wrote privately to Tiptree to rebut Tiptree’s embrace of the dichotomy—and lists a bibliography that includes, among others, *The Second Sex* and *The Dialectic of Sex*.
- 6 I don’t mean to suggest there is only one take on gender among US feminists, only that “common sense” notions of gender have evolved away from the naturalized essentialist assumptions of my childhood and adolescence.

*I find myself wondering now what would have happened had she lived long enough to experience the shift away from biological determinism and the repudiation, by most US feminists, of essentialism. Would she have been able to start thinking of herself in association with “the women,” especially when they increasingly began to include men in the ranks of feminists?*

## Notes

- 1 I’ve been watching for studies of this discursive shift. Linguist Steven Pinker merely notes that “The linguistic term *gender* has been pressed into service by nonlinguists as a convenient label for sexual dimorphism; the more accurate term *sex* seems now to be reserved as the polite way to refer to copulation” (Pinker 27-8). This not only simplifies a much more complex usage, but also fails to historicize the usage.
- 2 In *The Price of Inequality*, Joseph Stiglitz offers an illuminating discussion of the process of how commonly held ideas change. Intellectual understanding does not alone suffice to change one’s thinking.
- 3 For an extensive explication of this, see Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985).
- 4 See L. Timmel Duchamp, “Creating the ‘Second Self’: Performance, Gender, and Authorship,” in *The WisCon Chronicles Volume 2: Provocative essays on feminism, race, revolution, and the future*, eds. L. Timmel Duchamp and Eileen Gunn. Aqueduct Press, 2008.

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L. Timmel Duchamp is the author of the Marq’ssan Cycle. She is also the founder and publisher of Aqueduct Press and the Features Editor for *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*.



## ☼ Outrunning the Reach of Society

*Lolly Willowses (or the Loving Huntsman)* by Sylvia Townsend Warner

By Karen Joy Fowler

*Lolly Willowses is a strange tale...It has an odd structure, a prickly heroine, slow pacing, and an unsettling message. It is angrier and more complicated than it initially appears...all things I happen to like in a book.*

Every few years I read somewhere that Sylvia Townsend Warner is overdue for a revival. My evidence that this revival never actually happens is simply that I know, in another couple of years, I will be reading again how the revival is overdue. World without end.

*Lolly Willowses (or the Loving Huntsman)* is Warner's first novel. Published in 1926, I read now that it was instantly popular, particularly in the US. This, I admit, surprises me; I suffer from that special snob-bishness that believes nothing I love will ever be truly popular. But *Lolly Willowses* is a strange tale, and I'm gratified to learn that the readers and critics of 1926 took it to their hearts. It has an odd structure, a prickly heroine, slow pacing, and an unsettling message. It is angrier and more complicated than it initially appears. These are all things I happen to like in a book.

Many novels center on women of passionate connection. Such women live for love or they die for it. They seek revenge or maybe the crown or maybe a husband or maybe someone else's husband. They martyr themselves for family or cause, kick ass, and do all the other things the story requires.

Few novels devote themselves to women who wish with equal passion to be left alone. This is especially true when these are women of no great beauty, women who have reached a certain age. Laura Willowses (Aunt Lolly) is a Victorian spinster who, after many years of faithful family service, wants a life to herself, free from entanglements and expectations, free also from the support and loving interest of her relatives. This seems like a simple enough thing to want, especially for a woman like Laura of small but independent means. And yet this modest goal can only be accomplished with supernatural help.

The story slips by so smoothly—though leisurely paced, it is a quick and effortless read—that it is easy to miss how subversive it is. Here we have Aunt Lolly, the adored spinster aunt, who will always put her own needs and desires aside for any and everyone in the family; Aunt Lolly,

who can always be depended on; Aunt Lolly, so uninteresting to her relatives, she hardly merits a whole book.

And here we have the other Aunt Lolly, the woman who wants solitude and freedom more than she wants love and family. This is a deeply subversive desire, as Virginia Woolf will note a few years later in *A Room of One's Own*. When women begin to put their own needs first, the world will collapse.

As in *A Room of One's Own*, what's needed is not a psychological space, but a geographical one. One must outrun the reach of society. In Warner's book the space Laura needs is a remote rural village called Great Mop. If there is a love affair at the heart of *Lolly Willowses*, it is between Laura and the woods, Laura and the wind, Laura and the moon. When Laura's nephew Titus announces his own engagement, Laura understands him to be only the intermediary. The real match being made is between his fiancée and the grounds of Lady Place, the estate he has inherited.

One of the subversive moves the book makes is to grant women the same deep connection to those wild, remote places that typically belong to men. Laura was exiled from Lady Place when her father died. Sent to London to live with her brother, she feels herself to be "a piece of property forgotten in the will." This is not to say that she objects. Like the rest of her family, she assumes that an unmarried sister will be absorbed into the life of one brother or another. Years and pages pass, but she never feels at home in the city. She isn't seeking safety or comfort. She daydreams about lonely places after dark. She wants something she can't articulate, something heard in "the voices of birds of ill-omen."

Warner's evocations of the natural world are beautiful, filled with the electricity of Laura's longing and also with a sense of unease. On the one hand "...the hills folded themselves around her like the fingers of a hand." On the other, "The wind and the moon and the ranging cloud pack were not the only hunters abroad that night: something else was hunting among



the hills, hunting slowly, deliberately, sure of its quarry.”

For most of the story, there is little to suggest the supernatural; only a handful of strange moments disturb the placid surface of the narrative. Laura discourages one suitor by suggesting that he may well be a werewolf, since many are without knowing it. Her brother and sister-in-law listen to this with horror—it is the end of their attempts to marry her off. But then the moment disappears, the story continues. Laura feels “that she [is] stitching herself into a piece of embroidery with a good deal of background.”

Some of this background is the First World War. With so many men now missing, the unmarried woman has become a social problem, less pitiable and more sinister. To her nieces who grow up during the years of that war, Laura, her whole generation of women, are “unenterprising,” passively accepting the plans others make for them. But when Laura begins to behave independently, she is equally censored. Her family responds with hurt and horror to her sudden plans to move to the countryside. How can she be unhappy, she who has always been so well cared for? How can she be so ungrateful?

When her nephew Titus follows her to Great Mop, the family is terribly pleased. He is writing a book; she can be useful to him in all sorts of ways; she won't be so much on her own. It is all very suitable. But Laura knows that she is being reeled back in and the realization makes her desperate. She understands the powerful forces arrayed against her. Her list of these forces includes Society, the Law, the Church, the History of Europe, the Old Testament, the Bank of England, and Prostitution. She understands that there is only one place where she might look for help. Here things take their unexpected turn.

It is hard to say much more without feeling that I am spoiling the book for the first-time reader; probably I have already said too much. When the supernatural intrudes, Laura's response is delightfully matter-of-fact. In a moment that echoes her earlier observation that many werewolves don't recognize themselves, she realizes that she, too, is merely becoming the woman she has always been. Even among

the denizens of the dark, Aunt Lolly is no one's fool and no one's puppet.

This is not a book that fits comfortably into any genre or demands one particular reading. Is the ending a happy one? Your mileage may vary. Is Laura a wicked woman, a selfish one? Is she extraordinary, or does every woman who passes as safe and comfortable know in her heart that she is dangerous? In the book's most famous passage, Laura compares such women to sticks of dynamite. “Women have such vivid imaginations and lead such dull lives,” she says. She shares her vision of women all over Europe, “living and growing old, as common as blackberries, and as unregarded... All the time being thrust further down into dullness when the one thing all women hate is to be thought dull.”

I read now that Warner was dismayed by the responses of critics and readers who thought she'd written a charming and whimsical tale. Part of the fault here is hers—the tone is mostly light, the prose exquisitely wrought, the observations Austenish in their comic discernment. The book does not demand you take it seriously.

But this vision of continents filled with invisible unhappy women will, if you let it, draw blood. *Lolly Willowes* leaves us with a number of questions, but this is perhaps the most provocative among them: in the world post-World War I, the book suggests that no woman could be completely free without also being bad. Was this true then, and is it still?

*[T]his vision of continents  
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*The story slips by so smoothly—though leisurely paced, it is a quick and effortless read—that it is easy to miss how subversive it is.*

*One of the subversive moves the book makes is to grant women the same deep connection to those wild, remote places that typically belong to men.... Warner's evocations of the natural world are beautiful, filled with the electricity of Laura's longing and also with a sense of unease.*

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Karen Joy Fowler is the author of six novels and three short story collections. She won the World Fantasy Award in 1999 and in 2011. She is Co-Founder of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award.



## ☪ Pain, Upheaval, But Not Defeat

*These Burning Streets* by Kelly Rose Pflug-Back, *Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness*, August 2012, 56 pages, \$10

Reviewed by Evan Peterson

*[M]uch of the poetry's strength comes from its ability to use imagination to flee the prison in which the author languishes. I don't mean that as hyperbole; Kelly Rose Pflug-Back published this during incarceration.*

I'm unsure if I've done justice to this book in writing this review. I want to honor the truth that abjection has been an inspiration to this work, yet I find that much of the poetry's strength comes from its ability to use imagination to flee the prison in which the author languishes. I don't mean that as hyperbole; Kelly Rose Pflug-Back published this during incarceration. Printed by the anarchist press *Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness*, the chapbook's proceeds go toward Pflug-Back's legal fees (mischief charges, related to protests at the G20 meeting in Toronto in 2010).

While this chapbook may have a title that evokes images of riots and political unrest, the poems themselves have an antique and surreal rather than dystopian air, even occasionally feeling romantic in the Byron/Shelley sense. There's plenty of upheaval, but this isn't an overtly political book.

Though the collection is framed by a foreword and appendix that bring attention to the author's battles with police-state and prison tactics (not to be taken lightly), the poems themselves transmute these experiences into the stuff of dreams. The process is not quite metaphorical, but more akin to the coping strategy of turning a miserable situation into a fable over which the storyteller has some agency.

In the opening poem, "Sweet Mercy, Her Body an Arc of Wild Beasts," the poet lingers on many images of bones, mostly broken, and closes with the image of "a world/ no longer drawn as if by some hand// enamored/ of human pain." Bones return in the following poem, and "can't withstand even the force of being fit back together."

There is pain and mourning here, but not defeat. In "Hepatomania," a damn fine horror poem, the speaker identifies with Frankenstein's monster without clumsiness or cliché. Instead, there's a collective unity of those who are marginalized (which dovetails with Mary Shelley's political justice themes):

my body a mess of scars  
too ugly to fake.  
I am sewn together from the flesh  
of many,  
& we ache.

Then, in "Tarantelle" and "Wolf Suit," things take a swooping turn towards fairy tale. Forgive the obvious comparison to Angela Carter and Anne Sexton, but they are the titans of the dark modern fairy tale, particularly from a feminist perspective. To whom else would I compare poems in which a mother figure uses fish-bones to comb the speaker's hair, or the music of a harp draws monsters from beneath the bed? There's also solidarity with the work of other surreal fable-poets such as Susan Slaviero or Aase Berg (whom I also recommend highly).

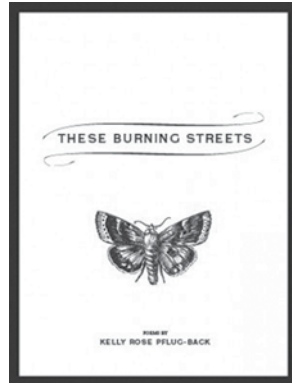
What began in war-torn cityscapes leads to rustic, magically-charged spaces, then returns to urban wreck. The book's relentless scraping against dramatically unpleasant images may make or break this book for readers. There is, no doubt, some overwrought imagery. But isn't that appropriate?

Once I read the appendix, "Every Prisoner is a Political Prisoner: A Memoir," and I learned what actually happened to Pflug-Back during and after her arrest, the images evoked in the poetry seemed entirely fitting. The book's back cover states that she was tormented in jail, and what the essay describes certainly sounds like torture. I admit with a bit of shame that her jail experience makes me afraid to protest anything, ever.

"He woke up alone and dug the dirt from under his nails/ with a little broken piece of her," we are told in "Holes in the Backdrop." The heart and mind present in these poems led me to believe that Pflug-Back writes about brokenness as a way of resisting her government's attempts to break her spirit.



*There is pain and mourning here, but not defeat.... The heart and mind present in these poems led me to believe that Pflug-Back writes about brokenness as a way of resisting her government's attempts to break her spirit.*



**1995**

**By Kelly Rose Pflug-Back**

You're just the same, painting your little yellow stars:  
tracing the rib cage of the bull with the toe of your boot  
as rain collects in the hollows of your patchwork heart and lungs.

This is only time passing;  
rain in the gutter and on the stiff bodies of dogs—  
a thousand tiny hands against the window pane.  
I watch my chest cavity fill up with washed and ironed yellow suns  
as you put out street lights and the bodies of fireflies with your  
blunt fingertips,  
wasted under the thousand shining points of Cassiopeia's exposed viscera.

We're being consumed without apology  
by this dead field with its four churches,  
its soft opera of torn paper caught in the back draft of gulls circling,  
bringing sad news from home.

Pink eyed mice gnaw at my bones  
while the dust clots dance with trace amounts of your ghost,  
moving in time to the drunk staccatos of heart valves.  
They plant themselves like spores  
and sprout small white flowers, like the knuckle bones of dolls.  
They grow even without light,  
still thriving in the aftershock of your passing.

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Evan J. Peterson is a poet, fiction author, columnist, and book reviewer. He is the founding editor of *ZiReZi*, and he blogs at *Poemocracy.blogspot.com*. For more see [EvanJPeterson.com](http://EvanJPeterson.com).

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Kelly Rose Pflug-Back is a social activist, poet, and writer whose fiction addresses displacement, class conflict, and social alienation. She has a recent story online in *Strange Horizons Fiction*. For more see [kellypflug-back.wordpress.com](http://kellypflug-back.wordpress.com).




## 🌀 Family Dynamics, Celestial and Mundane

*Sister Mine* by Nalo Hopkinson. Grand Central Publishing, March 2012,

320 pages, \$23.99 hardcover, \$15 trade paperback, \$10.99 ebook

Reviewed by Ama Patterson

*What happens when the family in question includes those about whom global myths are made? How to assert and claim space for one's self in that ongoing narrative? This is just one of many questions and challenges facing Makeda, the heroine of Nalo Hopkinson's newest novel.*

12  *Sister Mine explores kinship, twinship, and the intense rivalry and intimacy unique to sisters. Hopkinson reveals the myriad ways that families hurt, heal, torture, and empower one another.*

*Sister Mine explores kinship, twinship, and the intense rivalry and intimacy unique to sisters. Hopkinson reveals the myriad ways that families hurt, heal, torture, and empower one another.*

Every family has its own mythology: its own stories of birth and death, heroism and revenge, love and scandal; narratives embellished or eroded by time and retelling, explaining how that family came to its present form. Teasing factual truths from wistful fictions (or straight-up lies) can be difficult, and the results tough to swallow under ordinary, mortal circumstances. What happens when the family in question includes those about whom global myths are made? How to assert and claim space for one's self in that ongoing narrative? This is just one of many questions and challenges facing Makeda, the heroine of Nalo Hopkinson's newest novel, *Sister Mine*.

Born of a nature god and a mortal woman, surgically separated from her conjoined twin sister Abby, Makeda is the unmagical "claypickins" of her family. Even Abby, left with a permanent limp by the separation surgery, has mojo: a gorgeous singing voice and prodigious musical talent. Abby is successful, responsible, and bossy; Makeda is willful and a bit reckless. Once best friends, the sisters have grown apart. Makeda can occasionally glimpse the "Shine"—the glow of magic—but seems destined to remain an outsider looking in. Ever since Makeda overheard Abby and one of their celestial uncles deride Makeda as "the donkey," she has sought escape from her relations.

Makeda moves to a downtown artists' warehouse with a working rock band (and attractive lead singer) in residence, and thinks she may have found her new home. Of course, nothing is ever as simple as it appears. Mysteries abound in her new-found sanctuary. Monstrous magic stalks and assaults her on the streets of Toronto. Her ailing father, Boysie, goes missing. In searching for him, Makeda uncovers serious secrets about her fractious paternal relatives and herself, and discovers that knowledge is, indeed, power.

Hopkinson's first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), won the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest and the 1999 John

W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Since then, she has published five novels and one short fiction collection, and edited or coedited four anthologies, receiving numerous additional awards and accolades including two Auroras, two Sunbursts, and a World Fantasy.

As in Hopkinson's prior work, *Sister Mine* draws many of its fantastical elements from Afro-Caribbean cosmology. A silk cotton tree (native to West Africa) housing spirits in its gnarly roots flourishes in a Toronto back yard until decimated by a freak bolt of lightning. Initial suspicion turns, naturally, to Shango, known here as Uncle Flash. Most of Makeda's celestial family is based on archetypes from the Yoruba pantheon: Ogun becomes Uncle (or General) Gun; Erzulie becomes beautiful Aunt Zeely; the Ibeji twins become the Bejis. Hopkinson portrays them all in a way that is both mystical and familiar. They speak of haints and firewalls in the same breath, as different manifestations of spirit. They love, quarrel, and play favorites. Powerful, but neither infallible nor omnipotent, these characters are ancient and eternal, yet utterly modern. Supernatural elements of varying origin exist comfortably side by side. Hopkinson's syncretic imagination also encompasses a Nessie-style lake monster, shape-shifters, flying carpets, inspirited musical instruments enjoying active second lives, and a sentient, highly mobile kudzu vine named Quashee. Hopkinson makes delightful use of such disparate cultural referents as Jimi Hendrix' guitar, John Henry's hammer, and Christina Rossetti's classic narrative poem "Goblin Market." She mentions intriguing details from the lives of famous conjoined twins, especially those of Millie Christine, singers billed as the Two-Headed Nightingale. Hopkinson also re-purposes Ishmael Reed's *jes grew* to signify the organic world that is Boysie's province, and, as Makeda and Abby discover, the agent of his disappearance. The twins have little choice but to turn to his family for help.



The hazards and harmonics of familial relations are as eternal as the deities themselves. *Sister Mine* explores kinship, twinship, and the intense rivalry and intimacy unique to sisters. Hopkinson reveals the myriad ways that families hurt, heal, torture, and empower one another.

Family is the first arena in which people (and apparently celestials) learn about power and duty—concepts Hopkinson explores here. Mojo is power unique and specific to the individual who holds it. But is this power something one *owns*, or *gives*? Is Uncle Jack the master of birth and death, or its servant? Makeda and Abby's mortal maternal family are treated as beloved servants by the celestials. Uncle Jack communicates with them by "riding" Makeda's six-year-old cousin, in the way Afro-Caribbean deities ritually possess a willing human—their "horse." Is this honor or exploitation? Makeda was dubbed "donkey" partly because she could physically carry disabled Abby. Makeda

was glad to do so until her own insecurity and Abby's careless comment turned sisterly devotion into a source of shame. That "Donkey" was the working title of *Sister Mine* speaks to the various meanings of power (whether divine or mundane) and how they intersect with the obligations of family.

In all her work, Hopkinson presents characters of various ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, physical abilities, and combinations thereof, simply and directly, without reference back to some nonexistent (male, Eurocentric, heterosexual, ableist) "norm." She does diversity right, to the relief of readers everywhere.

Although not precisely YA, *Sister Mine* is definitely a coming-of-age story in which Makeda learns to balance agency and responsibility, to define and assert herself with and apart from her thoroughly maddening kin. Her journey is a fast-paced, slyly transgressive, satisfying supernatural adventure.



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Ama Patterson is a graduate of Clarion West and a member of the Beyon'Dusa Artists' Collective. Her short fiction is included in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction of the African Diaspora*.

## 🌀 Between Worlds

*Necessary Ill* by Deb Taber, Aqueduct Press, March 2013, 347 pages, \$20 trade paperback, ebook \$9.95

Reviewed by Nic Clarke

*Necessary Ill* is not an easy book. More than with any novel I've read recently, I found myself disputing with it—occasionally out loud and in public, which is a testament to both my ever-shrinking capacity for embarrassment and the gravity of the issues Taber explores. Ultimately, the novel doesn't translate its more disturbing and problematic aspects into either a coherent argument or an entirely successful story, but the effort is nonetheless courageous.

Taber posits a future in which humankind survives on a diet of ever-dwindling food, fuel, and water. A group of literal underground activists (they live in caves below New Mexico) are working to combat these problems. They call themselves the "neuter network"—since their members are, as our neuter protagonist Jin explains, "Not male, not female, not other gender. No gender at all"—and their solution to resource depletion is, essentially, killing lots of people so there won't be as many mouths to feed.

As a strategy, for human survival and for novel-writing, this might best be de-

scribed, euphemistically, as "interesting." But before the critique, some further explanation. While the novel repeatedly distinguishes between "neuts" and "gens" (gendered people), neuters are not simply without gender in the cultural sense, but are also biologically distinct. "Hormone balance and physical structure are different," we're told. "No reproductive system. No gender." All the neuts we meet were born with neuter bodies, although many were forcibly assigned gender at birth, and put through surgical and chemical efforts by their doctors and families to alter their physiognomy.

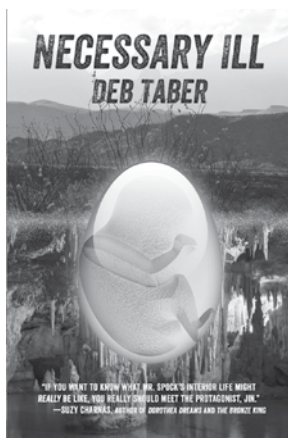
Taber uses neuts to explore bodies and embodiedness very well, notably in the interaction between neuts and their gen supporters. Neuts also have detailed awareness, unclouded (we're told) by sex hormones, of the workings of their bodies: they're able to assess, for example, nutrients needed at any given time for optimal functioning. But this improved awareness of the body extends to rapid healing, preternatural hearing, and

*Taber posits a future in which humankind survives on a diet of ever-dwindling food, fuel, and water. A group of literal underground activists (they live in caves below New Mexico) are working to combat these problems.*

Cont. on p. 14



## Between Worlds (cont. from p. 13)



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Taber uses neuts to explore bodies and embodiedness very well.... Neuts also have detailed awareness, unclouded (we're told) by sex hormones, of the workings of their bodies.... But this improved awareness of the body extends to rapid healing, preternatural hearing, and the ability to read others' chemical signals, turning them into an oppressed minority with superpowers.

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the ability to read others' chemical signals, turning them into an oppressed minority with superpowers—which may be liberating and uplifting, but it also minimizes real-life struggles that cannot be magically alleviated.

Then there's the fact that Taber's misunderstood and mistreated protagonists are actually mass murderers. When neuters are outed, they often become victims of abuse and violence. At one stage Jin attempts to persuade a gendered former childhood friend (whose husband and child one of its plagues murdered) that there's no reason to be afraid of neuts, since they're just "a scapegoat... a new group to pin troubles on instead of Jews, Gypsies, immigrants, people with different color skin." Yet as Taber has set things up, gendered people have genuine grounds for seeing neuters as a threat. While medieval Jews did not, in fact, kidnap Christian children and use their blood in hideous rituals, Taber's neuters really do spend their time, energy, and money coming up with ways to kill tens of thousands of people in a single disease-spreading sweep of a city. It's hardly surprising gens are wary of such people, and there is a disturbing sense that the story's structure gives credence to fear of the other, undermining Jin's assertion that it—Jin insists on this pronoun—is the target of violence "just because its body has fewer holes or lumps than [attackers] think it should."

Jin is a true believer, who works as a "spreader"—someone who goes into towns to plant diseases, in food, or on door handles, or even, in one episode that kills 600,000 people in a single city, in the form of rhythms planted in songs sent to local radio stations. It is utterly convinced it has people's best interests at heart when it kills their loved ones ("[W]e're too close to edge.... Large-scale death is only hope now."), and cannot conceive of why anyone would disagree. ("They say they want to improve their world, but they want to stop anyone who is trying to help.") Through Jin, Taber attempts not only to get us to sympathize with a serial killer (making for a compellingly discomfoting read), but also to think about humanity's future and the trade-offs that may be considered necessary between quantity and quality of life. Jin sees its diseases as surgical strikes,

"created in the passion of discovery, shared as a way of helping the species survive." "Survival has to be the goal," it says; "Otherwise, all of this is just murder."

It can, of course, be both, but Jin goes largely, frustratingly unchallenged on this until late in the novel. Sympathetic characters, both neuts and gens, either support spreading or turn a blind eye to it; those who oppose the idea are minor, morally suspect characters, like a woman who cheers on some would-be rapists when she realizes their victim is neuter.

This lack of challenge extends to the narrative itself, which is flawed by the choice to frame it in third- rather than first-person. Outside of dialogue or directly reported thoughts, there is little to distinguish between different characters' viewpoints. The resulting consistency of tone lends an air of objectivity, implying that the novel's stance is being laid out rather than just a character's when, for example, Jin ridicules a neut named Brett who identifies as male and the narrative backs it up by referring to Brett with the transphobic term "pseudo-man."

Likewise, it's repeatedly suggested by both characters and narrative that emotions arise solely from gender: that Jin is able to do what it does because it is neut, and therefore detached enough to see the bigger picture—or else unable to see the negative emotional consequences. Some neuts show greater capacity for emotion than Jin does, but it's made explicit that at least one is only acting. Jin does, at length, learn attachment to friends and begins to recognize—at least intellectually—why people might not be wild about the idea of it killing their families, however noble its intent, and however much lawyerly hair-splitting it does over whether deliberately causing someone's death is a removal of their agency (clue: it is). But Jin never makes the leap to empathy for strangers, and the novel strongly suggests that this is a fundamental quality of being without gender.

Taber's novel is an interesting devil's-advocate experiment, but perhaps the serial killer she offers for our sympathies would be better off as an unreliable narrator. Instead, the authority of third person stacks the deck in Jin's favor in ways that are, in the final analysis, more irritating and disquieting than revelatory.





## ☼ The True, the Blushful Hippocrene

*A Stranger in Olondria*, by Sofia Samatar, Small Beer Press, April 2013, 300 pages, \$24 hardback, \$16 trade paper, \$9.95 ebook

Reviewed by Nisi Shawl

Drunk on words, Sofia Samatar shares her favored intoxicant with us in this fine first novel, this new vintage of an old and beloved variety of fantasy. *Olondria* takes place in another world, one to which we're introduced through the childhood memories of Jevick of Tyom, son of a pepper planter on the world's far southern Tea Islands. Comparisons are inevitable to Le Guin's Earthsea books, those ocean-deep, mountain-high standards of immersive imaginative fiction. Though it's early in her career, Samatar's work certainly stands up to Le Guinish association. She may even court it, as when her Olondrian Northerners mispronounce Jevick's name as "Shevick," one phoneme off from Shevek, hero of *The Dispossessed*.

Leaving his provincial home, Jevick journeys to the Olondrian cosmopolis of Bain. Unlike his countrymen he has been made literate by an imported Olondrian tutor. Writing, to the Tea Islands' inhabitants, is a form of sorcery, and the hero's earliest encounters with the written word are imparted to readers with their magical force intact. Jevick shivers with shock upon realizing that the signs his tutor shows him can mimic the human voice. "A book," one author warns, is "a fortress, a place of weeping, a key to a desert, a river that has no bridge, a garden of spears." This warning and others like it do nothing to dissuade him of his fresh-acquired passion: "I embraced it and swooned in its arms," he tells us. He compares reading to communicating with the dead; it is not just sorcery but necromancy. Soon after arriving in Bain and glorying in its bookshops, however, Jevick experiences literal communication with the actual dead.

In the wake of a festival honoring Avallei, Olondrian goddess of love and death, Jevick finds himself haunted by a countrywoman he met on the ship that carried him to Bain. Terminally ill then, she has since died. Samatar's depiction of what Jevick endures at her immaterial hands is utterly harrowing. No physical threat could be worse than the "blinding rupture"

the ghost creates in the world by her mere presence. The contact between death and life feels to Jevick like two halves of a broken bone scraping together. He screams, vomits, beats his head black and blue in vain attempts to escape these painful visitations. The ghost, when he can at last bear to listen to her, complains that her intrusions hurt her, as well. She comes to him because she has to, because only he can provide her with the two things she needs to rest in peace: a proper cremation and a book telling her story.

The length of time Jevick resists the ghost's pleas is one of *Olondria's* two points of irritation. The solutions to Jevick's problems seem obvious: burn the body, write the book. But while he strains not to do what he must, political secrets are revealed and revolutionary machinations unfold, and these turn out to be important to Jevick's ultimate fate.

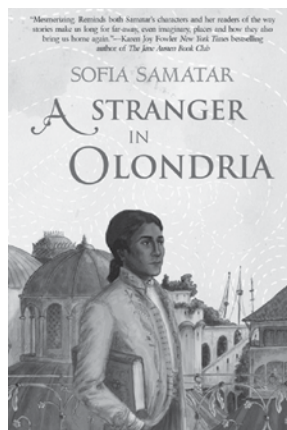
The other irritant is identical with one of the book's strengths: its fascination with words. Samatar is well and truly besotted of them. By the time I was halfway through I'd counted three "marmoreals"—a fairly purple-rosish adjective (relating to marble, not marmots, as I initially believed) that calls far too much attention to itself. This is a forgivable enough fault. Swallowing a few too many flashy modifiers is a cheap price to pay for enjoying the giddy dangers of the written word, the written world, the whirling, shining, life of books, so haunting, so like spirits, in which we are able to drown our sorrows and our selves.

*Though it's early in her career, Samatar's work certainly stands up to Le Guinish association. She may even court it....*

*The hero's earliest encounters with the written word are imparted to readers with their magical force intact.*

*The length of time Jevick resists the ghost's pleas is one of Olondria's two points of irritation.... The other irritant is identical with one of the book's strengths: its fascination with words.*

*Swallowing a few too many flashy modifiers is a cheap price to pay for enjoying the giddy dangers of the written word, the written world, the whirling, shining, life of books.*



Nisi Shawl won the James Tiptree, Jr. Award for her story collection *Filter House*. She was Guest of Honor at WisCon 35. She is Reviews Editor for *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*.

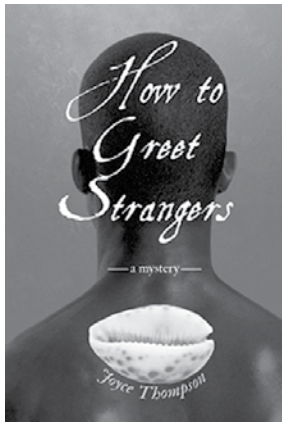


## ⚙️ Brujería of the Old-Fashioned Kind

*How to Greet Strangers* by Joyce Thompson, Lethe Press,  
February 2013, 235 pages, \$15 trade paperback, \$6.99 ebook

Reviewed by Daniel José Older

*The godparent-godchild relationship remains one of the more fascinating under-explored subjects in literature.... Joyce Thompson's new novel almost makes mystery gold out of this relationship—the murder of protagonist Archer Barron's Santería-madrina (godmother) sets the plot into motion—but it swerves into very basic stereotypes instead.*



*There's so much beauty in these pages. Archer Barron comes to life with stunning, fluid revelations.*

*[W]hile Thompson's prose turns skillful literary cartwheels, the godmother emerges as a ruthless caricature of a person. What could've been a complex, nuanced relationship comes down to something much simpler and sadder, and the story suffers for it.*

The godparent-godchild relationship remains one of the more fascinating under-explored subjects in literature. At its most intriguing, it's a dynamic fraught with all the gathering tensions and epic resolutions we writers yearn for: there are power struggles, cathartic arcs, and intersecting inner journeys, both divine and human.

Joyce Thompson's new novel almost makes mystery gold out of this relationship—the murder of protagonist Archer Barron's Santería *madrina* (godmother) sets the plot into motion—but it swerves into very basic stereotypes instead. Barron is a joy to spend time with: his well-crafted voice carries the story forward in leaps and bounds. Thompson's ease explaining some complex Santería rituals lets us know early on we're in reliable hands. The book seems poised to take us into uncharted territory, and with a tour guide like Barron we're ready to go along for the ride. But while Thompson's prose turns skillful literary cartwheels, the godmother emerges as a ruthless caricature of a person. What could've been a complex, nuanced relationship comes down to something much simpler and sadder, and the story suffers for it.

*Brujería*, witchcraft, is a term used often to malign Santería, but here we have a witch in the old gingerbread-house-dwelling, little-kid-eating tradition. She alienates her followers from their families, gets rich off them, and allows children to die because she insists their parents withhold life-saving medical care. *Madrina* Michaela is the stereotypical murder victim for whom the list of people wanting her dead is so long detectives don't even know where to start.

Like most grudging detectives, Barron commits a single act of goodwill and then gets (more-or-less) swept up in a dangerous game of so-and-so-etc.-etc. But the never-solved mystery of the book is what keeps Barron risking his life over the murder of someone he despised. His relationship to his former godmother was

troubled, loveless, bitter. He blames her for the death of his boyfriend and his failed relationship with his parents. When the book begins, he has transitioned from the religion into an awkward, gracefully depicted state of Orisa agnosticism. He has moved on, but the plot hinges on his determination to find Michaela's killer.

There's so much beauty in these pages. Archer Barron comes to life with stunning, fluid revelations. His voice glides effortlessly over the complex terrain of faith, sexuality, and race. The clunky murder mystery and its rushed denouement seem to get in the way of Barron's otherwise vivid and believable life. The stakes get higher in all the traditional stakes-getting-higher ways: cryptic warnings from the killer, more murders, an unhelpful police curmudgeon. But the engine driving it all forward remains indistinct.

There's another problem with *Strangers*. Thompson sets her tale against the backdrop of the Santería community. Santería, or *Lucumí*, is part of a worldwide tradition of Orisa worship that derives its pantheon and philosophy from a combination of West African cultures, particularly the Yoruba; it survived slavery in the Spanish-ruled Caribbean by disguising its spirits, Orisas, as Catholic saints. The resulting syncretistic spiritual tradition flourishes in Black and Latino communities. Hundreds of thousands of Orisa worshipers in the United States strive towards spiritual upliftment through a combination of ancestor worship, divination, spiritual possession, community engagement, and prayer.

Genre writers have been reimagining fantastical, horrific versions of African spirituality for a long, long time now. From the mindless man-eating natives in early Tarzan stories to the voodoo zombie trope in horror movies, the evil African witch doctor is nothing new. In the '80s we saw an updated version of it in *The Believers*, a film that depicts a New York santero sacrificing little children. The daily tabloids still present hyped-up, misinformed stories about



Santería at any opportunity. I can think of only a few scattered books and movies treating Santería with respect: Michael Gruber's excellent thriller *Tropic of Night* is the most recent example. Thompson's Santería is meticulously researched—a refreshing change. She depicts its ceremonies and philosophical tenets with the same grounded, lush prose that bring Archer's inner monologues to life. But stepping back, how far does *Strangers* really come from the demonizing depictions of *The Believers* and *Tarzan*?

Thompson shows us only one head-of-house madrina and gives us no reason to believe others would be any different, so Michaela carries the weight of representing the entire religion. The santeros in *Strangers* kill children by way of negligent homicide rather than human sacrifice. Thompson's santería thrives on persistent manipulation and subterfuge: worship-

ers are duped out of their life savings and alienated from their loved ones. Santería destroys more lives in this murder mystery than the actual murderer. At times, the book reads like an angry goodbye letter. Barron reminisces grimly over the wasteland that Santería has made of his life; salvation comes in the form of running away from his troubled past in what Thompson essentially describes as a cult.

The problem isn't that Thompson shows an evil madrina in her book. Every religion has its bad guys. The problem is that in a world that repeatedly, predictably, relentlessly demonizes African-based religions, Thompson has chosen to *only* show the evil madrina. An Orisa community imagined with more nuance, more depth, more love, would've not only been closer to the truth, it would've made *Strangers* into the groundbreaking, complex read that it almost was.

*The daily tabloids still present hyped-up, misinformed stories about Santería at any opportunity. I can think of only a few scattered books and movies treating Santería with respect:... Thompson's Santería is meticulously researched—a refreshing change.*

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Daniel José Older is a writer, composer, and paramedic living in Brooklyn, New York. He is the author of *Salsa Nocturna* and has been a featured reader at *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and Sheree Renée Thomas's Black Pot Mojo Reading Series.

## 🌀 Naturalistic Fiction and Pioneering Bioethics

*Bio-Punk: Stories from the Far Side of Research* edited by Ra Page,

Comma Press, February 2013, 244 pages, £9.99 trade paperback, £7.62 ebook

Reviewed by Victoria Elisabeth Garcia

*Bio-Punk* is an innovative and fascinating new anthology. Though the quality of the contents is mixed, it is a strong collection on the whole. It contains both powerful pieces of fiction and a cache of intriguing and accessible information about emerging biotechnologies, from stem cell therapy to human memory engineering to home-based biohacking.

The book was designed as an experiment in both SFnal speculation and science communication. Editor Ra Page commissioned fourteen authors to create work in collaboration with experts in science and bioethics. Though the authors produced the stories on their own, they consulted with their assigned experts in choosing and developing their subjects. An essay by the assigned expert(s) follows each story, highlighting ethical issues, evaluating the story's plausibility, explaining the underlying science, and describing the state of current research in the field.

Though all are at least somewhat technical, the stories, for the most part, have a

distinctly naturalistic tone. All take place on Earth, most in the near future. The majority are literary, character-based narratives about families, careers, caretaking, identity, romance, and loss. Readers drawn to Geoff Ryman's Mundane SF movement (<http://www.sfra.org/sf101mundane>) will find much to like here.

This is, of course, not the first attempt to teach science to a general audience through fiction. James Lovelock and Michael Allaby's 1985 novel *The Greening of Mars* comes to mind, as does B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, published in 1948. But in these, there was an ideological agenda beneath the narrative: The fiction was meant to persuade as much as to educate. *Biopunk* is very nearly free of polemic. The most interesting pieces in the collection are the ones that identify fresh problems and few solutions.

"Flesh and Blood," by Simon Van Booy, is such a piece. It takes place in a world where, through ubiquitous genomic screening, people learn their approximate life ex-

*Bio-Punk...contains both powerful pieces of fiction and a cache of intriguing and accessible information about emerging biotechnologies.*

*A major advantage of this book's coupled story-essay structure is that it frees the fiction writers to dance lightly over technical details that otherwise might bog their stories down. Some of the author-expert teams made especially fine use of this dynamic.*

*Cont. on p. 18*



## Naturalistic

### Fiction

(cont. from p. 17)

*[W]hile all of the essays are well worth reading, it's the stories that are the real stars of the collection... the best pieces in the collection are dazzlingly good.*

pectancies at the age of fifteen. This allows for both preventative medical treatment, and (for the especially hopeless) palliative spiritual training. The story's protagonist feels burdened by her knowledge of her projected death date, not because her life is expected to be short, but because it is expected to be exceptionally long. Convinced that their sheer abundance makes her days less valuable than those of her peers, she fakes her way into the company of people who are expected to die young. The story's companion essay, by anthropologist Ian Vincent McGonigle, provides both a nifty overview of both the promises and limitations of the emerging field of personal genomics, and a fascinating discussion of the way the Western concept of illness has evolved over the last hundred years.

A major advantage of this book's coupled story-essay structure is that it frees the fiction writers to dance lightly over technical details that otherwise might bog their stories down. Some of the author-expert teams made especially fine use of this dynamic. One of the best is Annie Kirby's piece, "Xenopus Rose Tinted." In this story, the reader is immediately and deeply immersed in the point of view of a genetically transformed test animal. Removed from the lab where he was created, the creature comes to live with a family of animal rights activists. Through observing the way they nurture (and occasionally fail to protect) their young daughter, the creature forms a unique bond with his hosts. The fact that biologist Nick Love is standing by to provide the reader with instant tech support allows Kirby to focus on rendering the creature's cultural, sensory, and emotional world. Afterward, when Love steps up to explain the fluorescence of the creature's eyes and the power of amphibian limb regeneration, it is as though a beam of light has been shot through the prism of Kirby's story. It's a marvelous reading experience.

Other pairings work less well. Adam Marek's story "An Industrial Evolution" follows a journalist and a primatologist who travel to Indonesia to visit an orangutan preserve. Years before, the primatologist had risked her life, her health, and her professional reputation to save the orangutans. Now, the population is safe and growing—but only because the

orangans have learned to do commercially valuable labor. The story is a compelling read. Thorny questions are posed about wildness, the meaning of conservation, and how to balance environmental stewardship with economic expedience, and it would have been very interesting to hear a professional's take. Unfortunately, the companion essay doesn't give us that. Instead, it focuses on a scientific grace note that is both implausible and unnecessary to the narrative. Delving into reproductive immunology and the creation of chimeric animals, the essay in-and-of-itself is quite interesting, but as a coda to the Marek story, it's a frustrating mismatch.

Indeed, while all of the essays are well worth reading, it's the stories that are the real stars of the collection. Though the quality of the fiction does vary, the best pieces in the collection are dazzlingly good.

One particularly fine piece is Toby Litt's "Call It 'The Bug' Because I Have No Time to Think of a Better Title." In this fleet and gorgeous piece of metafiction, dystopian speculation about life extension technology wreathes around a deeply personal discussion of a parent's failing health. Told in a confessional rush, "Call It 'The Bug'" slaloms, fluently and honestly, from giddiness to grief, from sarcasm to love, and from horror to quiet respect. Its companion essay, by medical engineering researcher Nihal Engin Vrana, is also among the finest in the collection.

Another standout is Jane Feather's story "The Challenge," which follows a soldier's mother who takes part in a malaria vaccine trial. At once gentle and harrowing, the piece evokes Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* in the best possible way. Justina Robson's "Madswitch" is another highlight. Told in language that is both sharp and light, the story describes an amateur researcher who, hoping to help her autistic brother and her Alzheimer's-afflicted mother, uses transformed bacteria and information from Internet listservs to do pharmacological experiments in a shed behind her house. The protagonist's life of "eureka" moments, weariness, black humor, and enduring hope is wonderfully wrought, as are her alarming breaches of lab protocol.

*The best piece, arguably, is Simon Ings' "The Wrestler."... Graceful, tightly constructed, and told with humor, it's an inspiring meditation on the history of biology and on what it means to be a scientist, a spouse, and a parent.*



The best piece, arguably, is Simon Ings' "The Wrestler." In this story, an African American toxicologist and his wife, a Latina attorney, weather familial, cultural, and marital conflict while deciding how to treat their unborn child's spina bifida. After travelling to Cuba so that his wife can undergo a high-risk surgical procedure, the protagonist encounters his wife's grandmother, a former Soviet biologist who still clings to many of her old Stalinist beliefs about evolution and the loosening of biological constraints in response to social will. Graceful, tightly constructed, and told with humor, it's an inspiring meditation on the history of biology and on what it means to be a scientist, a spouse, and a parent. Its companion essay, the second in this book by previously mentioned anthropologist Ian Vincent McGonigle, explores the ways we construct scientific knowledge and how we handle risk and scientific uncertainty. It is likewise among the best in the collection.

A few of the pieces, alas, are more talk than action. "The Modification of Eugene Berenger," by Gregory Norminton, is about a clergyman from a church that treats radical body modification as sacred. When an old friend becomes depressed after the breakup of his family, the clergyman attempts to minister to him, even though the friend views extreme body modification as vile. While the theological angle is somewhat interesting, the shouting match that makes up the bulk of the story is not. Works like James Patrick Kelly's 1990 story "Mr. Boy" and John Varley's 1977 novel *The Ophiuchi Hotline* explored this subject with more zest and more nuance decades ago. Given the steady development of new body modification techniques and the recent suicide of iconic body mod pioneer Dennis "Stalking Cat" Avner ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalking\\_Cat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalking_Cat)) (arguably the contemporary human who has come closest to living the kind of life that Norminton describes), it is disappointing that the subject did not receive a more thoughtful treatment here.

Sara Maitland's story, *Anaka's Factors*, is also mostly talk. The piece describes a lesbian couple's decision to use stem cell technology to allow one spouse to fertilize the other's ovum, thus giving the child two biological mothers (or perhaps, one

mother and one female father). Though its subject is a compelling and hopeful one, and though Maitland's prose has both heart and flair, the piece still amounts to little more than a staged debate. Researcher Melissa Baxter's accompanying essay on stem cell therapies and their potential use in fertility treatment is quite good, however.

Despite a few missteps, the book as a whole is a delight, and as an experiment in science communication I would have to call it a success. *Biopunk* demonstrates a way to transform fiction readers' curiosity and wonder into a more solid kind of scientific literacy.

*Despite a few missteps, the book as a whole is a delight, and as an experiment in science communication I would have to call it a success.*




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Victoria Elisabeth Garcia's fiction has been published in *Polyphony*, the *Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Seattle with her husband, comics creator John Aegard, and a chunky but agile little dog.



In 1973, with a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, I joined the faculty at the School of Social Work, University of Washington. After 30 years in academia, I retired to focus more intensively on my artistic journey. This post-mid-life exploration has become a major turning point for me, and I have been encouraged by others’ responses to my work as well as by the tremendous impact this journey is having on me personally.

My artistic journey is fueled by my desire to experiment with ways to explore and understand nature’s mysteries and wisdom (including my own). A penchant for haiku poetry also influences my work. My process often begins by creating spontaneous, mixed-media surfaces, e.g., charcoal and water, pouring paint to create unexpected and interesting textures, applying acrylic gel medium and spackle (plus sand, sawdust, and string) to build up surface patterns, and staining papers and applying these without a thought to what I might “discover.” Once the surfaces are created, I endeavor to “make sense of nonsense,” to discover or excavate the elusive and symbolic meanings of my apparently haphazard marks, shapes, and gestural renderings.

I like the cognitive/intellectual aspect of this part of creative process. It stretches my mind, pulls me into a discovery, problem-solving mode. Ultimately, my work succeeds when I am able to integrate free experimentation and deep personal expression. I love the idea that a finished piece is like a haiku poem, an elegant visual metaphor for a profound truth.

My “tree spirit” paintings explore the subtle power and mystery of trees, especially their secret lives or “souls.” Tree symbolism has intrigued artists, philosophers, and mystics for centuries. For example, trees have long been associated with a sense of mystery, magic, strength, and wisdom. Throughout history, tree imagery has been featured in myths, parables, dream theories, and art. Trees are often depicted as nature’s gladiators whose strength enables them to continue to struggle and survive despite great odds

and dire circumstances. In many cultures, trees are revered as totems of unseen forces or potent symbols of such qualities as longevity, fertility, and immortality.

In addition to the cultural importance of trees, scientists are expanding our knowledge about the basic nature of trees, how they survive threats, and their fundamental value as the “lungs” of the earth in moderating carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. For example, an article in the *New York Times* (October 1, 2011) reports recent scientific evidence that forests absorb more than 25% of the carbon dioxide produced by human activities.

To me, trees are important for both their scientifically-documented place in an ecologically balanced world, and for their symbolic significance that represents the hidden, mysterious pull and continuity of nature.

Seattle, Washington, 2013  
[www.cherylrichey.com](http://www.cherylrichey.com)





*Tree Totems 1*



*Tree Totems 2*



*Tree Totems 5*



*Tree Totems 3*





*Sibyllic Cypress*



*Tree Totems 4*

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