

The Cascadia Subduction Zone

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Ogun, Lord of the Forest, Iron, and Tools,
ascends from the bottom of the Ocean to the top of the mountain

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Seeing C.M. Kornbluth as Gender-Egalitarian (For Those Who Have Seen Him as Anything But)¹

by Mark Rich

In early 1941, when Cyril Kornbluth was not yet eighteen but already writing, publishing, and collaborating, newlyweds Catherine L. Moore and Henry Kuttner, both of them successful professional writers, made it known they were uniting their professional lives and collaborating on a regular basis. Their bylines came to include “Lewis Padgett” and “Laurence O’Donnell.” These men’s names concealed a husband-wife writing team—insofar as a collaboration that had been unveiled, at least within fan circles, might be said to be concealed.

In 1946 Cyril, who had adopted a variety of bylines as a teenager, began publishing detective stories under a new one that for the first time acknowledged his family name. In “C.M. Kornbluth,” the “C.” stood for Cyril. He had no middle name. “M.” stood for Mary. He and Mary had married just before his service in World War II; and bringing Mary into the picture bore some relation to how numbers would add up at tax time. Since he admitted this in his correspondence, we might conclude cynically that Cyril was engaging in a dance with convention and expedience. Yet he also told friends that he and Mary were pursuing an “invisible collaboration” of the Moore and Kuttner sort. That the byline did reflect some not-at-all cynical realities seems evident. For one thing, Cyril respected Mary’s writing. For another, Mary contributed to Cyril’s stories—although we have almost no idea how often or how much.

I find it striking, however, that Cyril adopted something other than a Lewis Padgett sort of name. A byline beginning with initials opened the possibility, in the minds of readers, that the author’s sex was female. The byline “C.L. Moore” had suggested this in the 1930s—accurately. In the 1950s at least one reviewer made this assumption about C.M. Kornbluth, mistakenly—and accurately, too, to some unknown degree.

Cyril strongly wanted the byline’s initials to remain exactly as they were. He made this clear after an editor made a slip

and put “Cyril M. Kornbluth” on a dust jacket. In a note to another editor about the byline you can almost hear his fist coming down in his insistence that the name to be published in a book had to be exactly “C.M. Kornbluth.” Nothing more. Nothing less.

For those who care about such matters, the feeling seems inescapable that the appearances of “Padgett” and “O’Donnell” marked the disappearance of an accomplished and successful woman writer.

Since, to my knowledge, Mary Kornbluth in the 1930s had only one letter-column publication to her name—her maiden name, to boot—the byline “C.M. Kornbluth” marked something different:

A debut.

Late in 1938 a young science fiction reader named Mary Byers, of rural Springfield, Ohio, wrote to John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*. Provoked by letters in the “Brass Tacks” column sent in by male fans, her responses reflected a feisty spirit and an attitude that in a later decade might have earned her the epithet of feminist. With youthful enthusiasm one of these correspondents, Isaac Asimov, in addressing the issue of the “feminine interest” in science fiction, had associated weak qualities in SF stories with women characters, and advocated their expulsion. Byers wrote in reply: “Undoubtedly it has never occurred to him to wonder whether the girl fans like the incredible adventures of an almost-ridiculous hero any better than he likes the impossible romance of an equally impossible heroine.... To his plea for less hooley I give my whole-hearted support, but less hooley does *not* mean less women; it means a difference in the way they are introduced into the story and the part they play. Let Mr. Asimov turn the pages of a good history book and see how many times mankind has held progress back; let him also take notice that any changes wrought by women have been more or less permanent, and that these changes were usually made against the prejudice and illogical arguments of men, and feel himself chastened.”²

[Men’s names concealed a husband-wife writing team—insofar as a collaboration that had been unveiled, at least within fan circles, might be said to be concealed.

[Mary] Byers wrote in reply: “Undoubtedly it has never occurred to him to wonder whether the girl fans like the incredible adventures of an almost-ridiculous hero any better than he likes the impossible romance of an equally impossible heroine....”

(cont. on p. 2)



**C.M. Kornbluth as
Gender-Egalitarian
(cont. from p. 1)**

[A] romance between the male Futurians as a whole and Mary Byers seems to have begun instantly—which seems natural, given their Communist-influenced egalitarian attitudes and her assertive spirit.

Although Asimov did respond in “Brass Tacks,” the full extent of the Byers–Asimov conversation—serious on her part, boyishly boisterous on his—will almost certainly remain a matter for conjecture. At the time, pulp magazines routinely printed correspondents’ addresses, an act that encouraged network-formation among fans. Byers and Asimov, as a consequence, corresponded directly; Byers then traveled to Manhattan to meet him; and she made a second trip in early January 1941, coinciding with his twenty-first birthday. This time she made a longer stay in New York, taking a room at the YWCA and meeting local luminaries, including Donald Wollheim, leader of the Futurian Literary Society of New York, and Campbell. Presumably, too, she met Campbell’s secretary Kay Tarrant, at a time when Tarrant was, invisibly, one of the most powerful women in science fiction publishing. Byers met other Futurians, as well; and a romance between the male Futurians as a whole and Mary Byers seems to have begun instantly—which seems natural, given their Communist-influenced egalitarian attitudes and her assertive spirit.³

Those who have read my book *C.M. Kornbluth: The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary* know more about Mary, factually, than anyone else alive—with the exception of those who have had personal contact with her, whose numbers are few, and dwindling.

Mary held a place of pivotal significance in Cyril’s life. She introduced him to sex. Their subsequent relationship disturbed his mentor and collaborator, the Communist but socially conservative Don Wollheim, and seems to have forced Cyril’s break with Wollheim’s circle. Mary then became Cyril’s life-companion: for they married before he entered the Army. What happened during World War II proved of significance. We have no record that Cyril and Mary had an agreement about their relationship, as did later Futurian Judy Zissman and her serviceman husband Dan Zissman. Yet it seems evident that Mary, remaining behind in New York and working as a secretary, enjoyed a freedom that observers in the 1960s might have called liberated. She direly threatened her prospects for future happiness, however.

Drug addiction and alcoholism took her in their grasps and became, like Cyril, life companions. Her exuberant life in wartime Manhattan damaged the young spirit that had so captivated the prewar Futurians.

All the same, her creativity survived. In Chicago, where the Kornbluths lived in the late 1940s, she worked on a novel whose beginnings Cyril regarded highly; and she became active in ceramics to the extent of doing commercial work. To the best of my knowledge the novel beginning vanished. Her efforts in ceramics likely survive, somewhere.

I have only undocumented evidence of one instance when Mary helped write a C.M. Kornbluth story. It happened before the Kornbluths’ move from Chicago back to the East Coast. Kate MacLean related to me, one evening when we sat talking in the WisCon con suite some years ago, a conversation she and Mary once had, I think by telephone. MacLean mentioned to Mary that she had read “The Marching Morons,” which had appeared in *Galaxy* in April 1951.

“Did you like the beginning?” said Mary.

“I liked it a great deal,” said Kate.

“Good. I wrote that.”

The month “The Marching Morons” appeared in print, the Kornbluths decided to move back East. When they made the move, Mary was pregnant. After this time she may have had less time to help Cyril with his career.

Cyril’s real embrace of the Moore and Kuttner visibly invisible collaborative model awaited the arrival of Judith Merrill in his life.

In wartime New York, Judy Zissman had an absent husband but a very present young offspring. Being a mother undoubtedly shaped the form her exuberance took in wartime and postwar Manhattan—the relatively sedate form of joining the same Futurians that Cyril and Mary had recently rejected. Judy found mentoring and companionship in fellow members Johnny Michel and Robert Lowndes—and later, outside the society, in Phil Klass, who published stories under the byline William Tenn, and Theodore Sturgeon. Divorced from Dan Zissman, she in essence married science fiction in early 1948 when she became Judith Merrill. Later in the year

© Mary held a place of pivotal significance in Cyril’s life.

2

Cyril’s real embrace of the Moore and Kuttner visibly invisible collaborative model awaited the arrival of Judith Merrill in his life.



she entered her short-lived marriage to Frederik Pohl. In the public eye, however, she remained married to science fiction.

She and Kornbluth collaborated on two novels, sharing writing duties equally. The month before their first, *Mars Child*, appeared in serial form, *Galaxy* magazine announced that the upcoming serial's author was Cyril Judd—and then revealed Cyril Judd's joint-byline nature. C.M. Kornbluth and Judith Merrill were engaging in a visibly invisible collaboration.

During the writing of the second novel, Cyril, Mary, and Judy shared a household. Cyril and Judy split writing duties and such chores as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, since Mary's pregnancy, being at risk, left her bedridden. Judy regarded Cyril as unusually egalitarian in his actions. "He was a devoted husband to Mary and a gentle one, and he was for that period of time an extraordinary man in being willing to be, to a great extent, a house-husband. Mary was a sculptor, and he regarded her work as every bit as important as his own, and never condescended in any way," she told me. The household included Merrill's two children. "So there was a lot of work to be done. And Cyril and I were dividing it."⁴

Cyril outlined that second collaborative novel, which would bear the title *Gunner Cade*, and did so along lines of Graustarkian melodrama—a form I would not have learned about for years, if at all, were it not for a chance remark made later by Anthony Boucher. George Barr McCutcheon, in his "Graustark" novels, employed an unusual story structure that revolved around a woman character who exercised her strength and power in a somewhat sly way that revealed, by the end, her considerable competence, intelligence, and integrity. It required that the apparent protagonist, the central male character, be somewhat self-deluded, feckless, and even stupid about matters. As a form, in other words, the Graustarkian melodrama advanced the notion that, when you get down to the nitty-gritty, women are on top of things, unlike the embarrassing men. The form not so much expresses a feminist outlook as the feeling that certain types of femalekind are not equal to malekind, but superior.

Cyril had employed Graustarkian form in his solo writing before collaborating in

1951 on *Gunner Cade*, and would retain it in his novelist's toolbox afterwards.

"Cyril Judd" also published a novelette that Judy, in an interview with me, dismissed as unimportant—a dismissal I find interesting. Although Judy was the female-writer half of Cyril Judd, Kornbluth seems to have felt a bit more comfortable in creating women characters of the sort found in that story: resourceful, independent-minded, and technically competent. Not long afterwards, for instance, he created a hard-headed, highly intelligent female lead character for his historical novel *Valerie*.

This novel saw publication in a line that welcomed a bit of sleaze and sexual provocation; and it does feature a woman who engages in episodes of primal sexuality—some of which may have been editorially imposed—and also sexual manipulation. Valerie, however, discovers that some of her lusty moments have come of being drugged—and she pulls herself free of her difficulties by sheer mental ability. The title, *Valerie*, may not have been Cyril's: for his working title was *Witchpricker*. He intended no humor with this name. The witchpricker in medieval Scotland traveled the land as part of the Inquisition, using a device that earned him his name. He "pricked" this device into women whom he had accused of being witches. With this working title, Kornbluth was pointing to the villain of the tale—the medieval oppressor of women, and, symbolically, the mid-20th century American Red-baiter.

Valerie had companions among Kornbluth's works—although the most important novel that featured a vibrant female leading character may never have reached completion and certainly never saw print. In his Chicago years Cyril dreamed of writing a novel based on the life of the Russian-born genius mathematician whom he knew as Sophie Kovalefsy, known now as Sofia Kovalskaia. Because of comments in his letters I believe he wrote some or much of it. Another novel of his that did see print, however, featured a character of the Kovalskaia type: a young woman student who unexpectedly finds focus for her life when she stumbles upon Cantorian number theory. This bright young mathematician, by the way, appears in the novel that also features a terrifying character who anticipates

She [Merril] and Kornbluth collaborated on two novels, sharing writing duties equally. The month before their first, Mars Child, appeared in serial form, Galaxy magazine announced that the upcoming serial's author was Cyril Judd—and then revealed Cyril Judd's joint-byline nature. C.M. Kornbluth and Judith Merrill were engaging in a visibly invisible collaboration.

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(cont. on p. 4)



C.M. Kornbluth as Gender-Egalitarian (cont. from p. 3)

Cyril may not have regarded his social attitude as “feminist,” that being a term having different meanings in different times.... However he might have named his sexually egalitarian attitude, he demonstrated it in his life and work.

Robert Bloch’s Norman Bates, but who, unlike Bates, actually is a woman.

Cyril may not have regarded his social attitude as “feminist,” that being a term having different meanings in different times; yet in his interest in Kovalskaia he would have been aware of the ferment in Russia in the 1860s, which encouraged young women to aspire to and sometimes achieve, as she did, intellectual liberty. However he might have named his sexually egalitarian attitude, he demonstrated it in his life and work.

A problem arises, then. Why has perception of Kornbluth strayed so far from reality? Take a program item at WisCon, for example, from a few years back. A panel’s description said that something—I fail to remember what specifically—was “as unimaginable as a feminist C.M. Kornbluth.”

I have a few notions as to how and why this odd, contrary-to-facts perception came into being. Several major book publications in Cyril’s lifetime, for instance, must have encouraged such a perception. Their bylines included the C.M. Kornbluth name; and their texts have offered the reading world major signs of a writerly attitude and writerly approach that goes far afield from anything we could call gender egalitarianism, anything we might say reflected conscious awareness of society’s need to offer to women and men opportunities to achieve intellectual freedom equally.

Those who know about my long preoccupation with Kornbluth may be surprised to hear that I have never felt particular enthusiasm for *The Space Merchants*, which Kornbluth co-authored with Frederik Pohl. The novel starts slowly, and offers facile passages in places where humanistic observations might be more fitting. At about one-quarter through it picks up velocity—only to reach an ending we might at best call cute. Once I became acquainted with the tautly dramatic *Takeoff*, Cyril’s first novel, and the intelligently engaging *Mars Child*, I wondered why *The Space Merchants* had achieved such prominence.

I discovered part of the answer *after* publication of my *Kornbluth*: for I learned that key people who had praised *The Space Merchants* for decades had never actually read it. By “key people” I mean core

science fiction readers of the 1950s who subscribed to science fiction magazines or bought them on newsstands, and read them thoroughly. These readers tended to find their novels in the magazines, and to keep those issues for future reference. If a serial did appear as a book from a publishing house, such readers were apt to buy that, too. Buying the book bore no necessary connection to reading it, however: for they had read it already.

Robert Silverberg carefully read my book immediately after publication and found himself taken aback when he learned that *The Space Merchants* is an altered and shortened version of the prior serial *Gravy Planet*, published in *Galaxy*. From 1953 until early 2010, when my book appeared, Bob thought he had read *The Space Merchants* when in fact he never had. He had read only *Gravy Planet*—a superior and sometimes beautiful performance. I regard the serial as quite Kornbluthian, even if not as richly textured as the earlier *Takeoff*.

As Cyril had done with the beginning of Judy’s Mars novel, he completely rewrote a fragment of Pohl’s and placed it within a novelistic structure—Graustarkian, as it happens; and in this case he seems to have sailed on to nearly the ending, which he left for Pohl to fill in. Pohl turned this novel in to *Galaxy* as it stood, however, and soon communicated to Cyril that editor Horace Gold was complaining that the manuscript was too short. Cyril then finished the novel with the last gritty, unusual chapters that hammer the nails on the coffin of the male protagonist, who finally learns in his guts exactly what kind of a dohickus he is while finding the means for restoring himself to usefulness in the new society he has entered.

When *The Space Merchants* came out from Ballantine Books, however, it lacked not only that full-bellows diapason-and-crescendo Graustarkian ending of *Gravy Planet*, but also vital parts of its novelistic structure, including the main display of intellectually free thought on the part of the central female character, medical doctor Kathy Nevin. In the book she appears as an airhead prone to giggles.⁵

In their collaborations Kornbluth and Pohl seldom used the Kornbluth-Richard Wilson system of the “hot typewriter”—a system for producing a single, quick rough

- © A problem arises, then. Why has perception of Kornbluth strayed so far from reality?
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I learned that key people who had praised The Space Merchants for decades had never actually read it.

The Space Merchants is an altered and shortened version of the prior serial Gravy Planet, published in Galaxy.



draft, in contrast to the Kornbluth-Merrill system of steady and progressive alternations of rough drafts and revisions. The two novels written hot typewriter, whose final manuscripts Pohl typed up, contain unfortunate depictions of women: the episodic *Search the Sky*, a 1954 Ballantine book, and a contemporary-disaster novel, *A Town Is Drowning*, a 1955 Ballantine.

Search the Sky has particular relevance to the question at hand, to judge from Justine Larbalestier's *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*. Larbalestier cites Joanna Russ's list of stories that "appear to be pro-feminist in intention," which includes *Search the Sky*; and of the books with which Kornbluth had involvement, she herself discusses only *Search the Sky*.⁶ While her notes about the novel are fairly cursory, Russ's and Larbalestier's lists may have had the combined effect of directing feminist-oriented readers to that particular work to the exclusion of any other Kornbluth collaborative or solo work.

Pohl regarded *Search the Sky* as more his novel than Kornbluth's, an assessment that accords with my experience as a reader. In *Kornbluth*, I called it "puzzling for its lack of a single defining Kornbluthian moment." My latest re-reading confirmed that sense, although I gained a stronger impression than previously of Kornbluthian passages, of a muted sort, appearing at the beginning, and then in even-numbered chapters. It also confirmed my sense that the novel verges on the embarrassingly bad—an unsurprising impression, perhaps, for a book whose rough draft took only nine days, and whose revision, by Pohl, only six days more.⁷

In *Search the Sky* the main male character, Ross, has this thought when first meeting the central female character, Helena, in Chapter Five: "Ross liked her face and wondered about her figure. Whatever it was like, it was covered from neck to knee by a loose shirt." Later that day he finds her exhausted by heat: "He picked her up without too much trouble... She was ripely curved under that loose shirt, he learned. He set her down easily, crouching himself, and did not take his hands away."⁸

The novel appeared on Russ's list not for such scenes as this but because of the episode taking place on the planet Azor,

where Ross and Helena encounter "a rigid, self-centered matriarchal order that only an act of God could break"—a world "sterile under an in-driven matriarchal custom."⁹ On Azor, a reversal has occurred, placing women above men, as a class, in terms of social power. The reversal is an incomplete and inconsistent one, however.

Ross's thoughts in Chapter Seven reveal his and his society's attitudes and stereotypes, as when he meets his first representative of Azor. "The figure shook its long hair loose, which provided Ross with the necessary clue: it was a woman. Not a very attractive-looking woman, for she wore no makeup; but by the hair, by the brows and by the smoothness of her chin, a woman all the same." He analyzes the technical world around him: "Nobody seemed to be doing anything very productive, he thought, but somehow everything seemed to get done. Automatic machinery, he guessed; if women were to have any chance of gaining the upper hand on a planet, most of the hard physical work would have to be fairly well mechanized anyhow."¹⁰

In Chapter Ten the following passage appears: "Women, Ross thought bitterly, women were basically inward-directed and self-seeking; trust them with the secret of F-T-L; make them, like the Cavallos, custodians of a universe-racking truth; and see the secret lost or embalmed in sterile custom. What, he silently demanded of himself, did the greatest of scientific discoveries mean to a biological baby-foundry? How could any female—no single member of which class had ever painted a great picture, written a great book, composed a great sonata, or discovered a great scientific truth—appreciate the ultimate importance of the F-T-L drive? It was like entrusting a first-folio Shakespeare to a broody hen; the shredded scraps would be made into a nest. For the egg came first. Motherhood was all."¹¹

This passage may well have been written by Kornbluth, for it contains elements of his style. Given that he seemed to have been taking the approach that he used in his own novels, with the male character pursuing his own mistaken or off-kilter thoughts and ideas until corrected, these ruminations made "bitterly," and these questions "he silently demanded of himself," express the roaringly chauvinist character that Ross

Search the Sky has particular relevance to the question at hand.... Pohl regarded *Search the Sky* as more his novel than Kornbluth's....

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(cont. on p. 6)



C.M. Kornbluth as
Gender-Egalitarian
(cont. from p. 5)

[T]he fact remains that the novel was almost undoubtedly Kornbluth's to a smaller degree than it was Pohl's....

His reward for all that he gave up? His name became associated with a ramshackle melodrama with the redeeming ending left off....

In 1961, when he had control over *Galaxy* magazine and was issuing novels under the *Galaxy* imprint, Frederik Pohl reissued *Mars Child*. He commissioned a cover showing a woman provocatively lifting her sweater, and retitled it *Sin in Space*.

actually is—and not the writer behind the character, who hastily pounded the words onto platen-backed typing paper, and who was quite aware of women's achievements in the arts and sciences.

However reasonable an approach this was, however, the fact remains that the novel was almost undoubtedly Kornbluth's to a smaller degree than it was Pohl's. He may have written the passage above, thinking that in the final chapters Ross would enter his darkest night and find reason for self-abnegation, and then discover a glimmer of hope for his human soul's return to wholeness. The story that he held in his mind, as he wrote his alternating chapters, was to *Gravy Planet* what the final result, *Search the Sky*, was to *The Space Merchants*. In helping with this project Kornbluth must have known he was giving away a great deal. This nine-day's wonder was stealing from his own work. It lifted the ending chapters, thought-by-thought if not word-by-word, out of "The Marching Morons"; it took the symbolist and satiric worldview of that story to shape a homily-sweet conclusion; it may have absorbed the election episode from that story's early draft; and it gave expression to the motif that had haunted him from his youth: that of the rocket trip that is death.

His reward for all that he gave up? His name became associated with a ramshackle melodrama with the redeeming ending left off; associated with a hasty, episodic satire that would posthumously give him a place in feminist critiques of science fiction; associated with a humdrum literary production that would make, for some readers, imagining a feminist C.M. Kornbluth impossible.

In 1961, when he had control over *Galaxy* magazine and was issuing novels under the *Galaxy* imprint, Frederik Pohl reissued *Mars Child*. He commissioned a cover showing a woman provocatively lifting her sweater, and retitled it *Sin in Space*. While the word "sin" may not reflect an anti-feminist attitude, in and of itself, the image evoked in the reader's mind by the title *Sin in Space*, combined with that new cover painting, reflected nothing of the novel's broadly humanistic vision.

Pohl told Merrill that he had rewritten a paragraph to justify the cover painting.

Much later Pohl stated in print that he "got back" at Cyril and Judy for how they had portrayed him in their second novel. "In *Gunner Cade* there is a sniveling, mean-spirited petty punk who plays an important if whiney part. Around that time Judy Merrill's four-year-old daughter was still having trouble with complicated names; the closest to mine she could come was 'Threadwick'—and that's the name of the sniveling punk. (The ways in which I then got back at Cyril and Judy any interested scholar is welcome to seek out for himself.)"¹² The character, as it happens, was named Fledwick—Fledwick, the Thief.

Judy never read Pohl's altered version of *Mars Child* and so never learned that Pohl's alterations were multiple, not singular—until I compared the versions and told her.

The changes themselves would provoke no great scandal: the altered passages offer low-grade titillation. Scandalous, however, is Pohl's presumption as an editor that he could alter a novel for commercial and also personal reasons—alter a novel to which its collaborative writers had brought the best of their technical and artistic abilities. If Pohl sought to degrade Judy's image, he may have succeeded. If Pohl sought to degrade the image of his erstwhile collaborator whom he claimed as a friend—there, too, he may have succeeded.

Sin in Space serves as an example of Pohl's assumed custodianship of the Kornbluth legacy.¹³

As unimaginable as a feminist C.M. Kornbluth?

Imagine that.

Notes

1. This essay springs from the talk "The Feminist Readers No Longer See: How Kornbluth's Egalitarian Fiction Has Been Altered Beyond Recognition," presented at the 2013 WisCon in Madison.
2. Byers, Mary. Letter, "Brass Tacks." *Astounding Science Fiction*, Dec. 1938, pp. 160-1. Reproduced in Larbalestier, 2002, p. 120.
3. Larbalestier, 2002, devotes space to the "feminine interest" correspondence that drew in Byers, and reproduces other letters to *Astounding* than hers. The Byers story ends there, however, in that book.



Byers on p. 121 is identified as “Mary Evelyn Byers”—a minor error that may have prevented Larbalestier from making the Kornbluth connection. Mary’s middle initial was G. My own *Kornbluth* presents aspects of Mary’s story from the time of her second visit to Manhattan. More information about her first visit may come to light, if Asimov scholars take interest.

4. Rich, 2010, pp. 174-5.
5. I discuss this in some detail in *Kornbluth*. In my research I’ve never come across clear evidence that Cyril ever read the Ballantine Books version. At one point he wrote to Pohl that reviewers were missing the point about *The Space Merchants*, with the point being that the authors were of course rabid conservationists. The thematic element of radical conservationism, however, really only comes through when it has an early build-up and then delivery at the end—which the Ballantine version omitted. In Pohl, 1976, Frederik Pohl offered few comments about Kornbluth. On p. 183, however, he noted, “Cyril and I had a working treaty. After the rough draft of the book was done, he was out of it. I always did the final revisions (except on the last novel we did together, *Wolfbane*), and I always did all the dealing with editors and publishers.” Pohl’s correspondence makes it clear that he regarded this “dealing” as contributing heavily to his “half” of the work on novels. (See the note below.) Kornbluth may have felt content to be “out of it” after the rough draft: for he had the reputation, from his Futurian days, of writing remarkably good first drafts.
6. Larbalestier, 2002, p. 73.
7. “But on *Search the Sky*, for instance, I made a bad deal—I spent six long, hard days rewriting the book that took us nine days to write, plus—on that as on all—the infuriating business of going into New York and talking to the editors, selling the story and explaining the story and collecting the money for the story and listening to comments on the story, which takes more time than the writing—or so, anyway, it seems at the time; I don’t suppose it really does. But it’s a damn nuisance, all the same.” (Frederik Pohl to Cyril Kornbluth, February 27, 1954: Archives, Syracuse University.)

8. Pohl and Kornbluth, 1954, pp. 50-1. Pohl’s 1985 revision for Baen, although “substantially different,” according to the copyright page, retains this passage verbatim. It calls to mind Byers’s note about “the way [women characters] are introduced into the story.”
9. *Ibid.*, p. 90 and p. 163. The former represents Ross’s thoughts; the latter is the description given by the ruling-intelligent figure at the novel’s end, on Earth.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 70, 72-3. These passages remain in the 1985 revision. Another scene, in which Helena, after a fight with Ross, is abashedly contrite and deferential to him, also remains unchanged in 1985.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
12. Pohl, Frederik, 1982. “Introduction to *The Syndic*, by C.M. Kornbluth.” In C.M. Kornbluth, 1982. *The Syndic*. New York: Baen Books, p. 10.
13. I use the word “assumed” for good reason. Cyril’s last agent was not Pohl but Harry Altshuler, who in 1958, the year of Cyril’s death, was peddling a number of polished literary miniatures, including one titled “The Meeting.” Pohl would later call these finished pieces “fragments.”

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Mark Rich has published in such venues as *Poem*, *Rattle*, and *Ship of Fools*, *Analog*, *SF Age*, and *Amazing Stories*. He is author of *C.M. Kornbluth: The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary*. He lives and works in Wisconsin.



Two Eleusinian Mysteries

Lud-in-the-Mist and *Paris: A Poem* by Hope Mirrlees

by Michael Swanwick

Hope Mirrlees was in many ways the epitome of the Jazz Age writer.

Her fantasy novel *Lud-in-the-Mist* was published to rave reviews, and Virginia Woolf, who printed "*Paris: A Poem*,"...characterized it as "obscure, indecent and brilliant."

Yet Mirrlees faded quietly into obscurity and silence.

There are many writers who created a single great work, sometimes among a slew of lesser attempts, other times not. But I can think of only one who created two great works, one each in separate literary forms. That writer was Hope Mirrlees.

Mirrlees was in many ways the epitome of the Jazz Age writer. She had an aristocratic background, an independent income, an excellent education, a much-gossiped-about lifestyle divided between London and Paris, and literary connections with everybody from Gertrude Stein to William Butler Yeats. She was glamorous enough to merit an appearance in the English edition of *Vogue*, and beautiful to boot. Her fantasy novel *Lud-in-the-Mist* was published to rave reviews, and Virginia Woolf, who printed "*Paris: A Poem*," as the fourth work by Hogarth Press, her kitchen table imprint, characterized it as "obscure, indecent and brilliant."

Yet Mirrlees faded quietly into obscurity and silence. Only in her old age were her two great works republished. *Lud-in-the-Mist* reappeared because Lin Carter discovered that by American copyright law it was in the public domain and slung it into his Ballantine Adult Fantasy line without asking her permission, and "*Paris, a Poem*" appeared in a mimeographed academic magazine, bowdlerized by the poet herself. Hardly an auspicious beginning for a literary reevaluation. Her saga, however, doesn't end there.

But first, we should look at *Lud-in-the-Mist*.

Time has been kind to this novel. When it came out, there were no expectations for a fantasy novel other than the expectation that it would be twee—and it certainly confounded that one. Now, however, we all know what's coming when we open such a book. But it's certainly not what Mirrlees provides. Consider only her hero, Nathaniel Chanticleer, who is a) plump, b) married, c) unhappily so, d) with children, e) respectable, f) prosperous, g) complacent, and h) the mayor of the eponymous town of Lud-in-the-Mist. This is certainly not the heroic young farm boy with a destiny



to become king that we've all been taught to demand.

Chanticleer is also more than half in love with death, a fact he keeps secret from the world, and one that cuts to the heart of the novel, though the connection only becomes clear at the end.

Dorimare, the sleepy mercantile nation of which Lud-in-the-Mist is the capital, borders on Fairyland, a fact that respectable people hold shameful. So much so that all references to it are considered obscenities. The worst insult in that land is to be called a Son of a Fairy and the vilest crime is to eat fairy fruit.

It is a calamity, then, when mysterious forces begin to smuggle fairy fruit into Lud-in-the-Mist, and one that its burghers would rather deny is happening than actually grapple with. But the consequences of eating it are madness and death. First, Chanticleer's daughter—and her entire finishing school—are exposed to the fruit and in a wild frenzy dance away from their homes toward the Elfin Marches. Then his young son confesses to being addicted to fairy fruit as well. It is time for Nat to rouse himself from his lifelong slumber and fight back. Yet those same shadowy forces from beyond the Debatable Hills have engineered his disgrace and impeachment.

In order to save his family (and, incidentally, heal his marriage) Nat Chanticleer will have to go up against the coordinated forces of the supernatural alone. Fortunately, there's more to him than he knows.

There are many pleasures to be found in Mirrlees's novel: The charming names of characters such as Hyacinth Quick-scuttle and Endymion Leer and places like Mothgreen, Appleimp Lane, and Swan-



on-the-Dapple. A canny use of folklore (her mentor was Jane Ellen Harrison, a superstar of Classical Studies), including knowing glimpses of Robin Goodfellow and other supernatural creatures. Hidden sexual references for the sharp-eyed to pick up on. A command of prose that can only be called magisterial. But its greatest pleasure lies in the unforeseeable twists and turns the plot takes.

In the introduction to the Fantasy Masterworks edition of *Lud-in-the-Mist*, Neil Gaiman wrote, “The book begins as a travelogue or a history, becomes a pastorate, a low comedy, a high comedy, a ghost story and a detective story.” All true but necessarily inadequate to describe Mirrlees’s accomplishment. Which was to write a tale that on the surface looks conventional but is actually anything but.

In the course of the book, the reader learns that Fairyland is inhabited by the souls of the dead, and that to cross its border is to leave behind all that can be comprehended by mere reason. In an act of final daring, Nathaniel Chanticleer crosses that boundary into the unknowable, and then returns to rescue Lud-in-the-Mist from its pervasive terror and restore an order they did not know was lost.

Yet even in triumph, he remains a melancholy, slightly baffled man. The laws of existence, as we know them, still apply.

I’ve read many attempts to explain exactly what this novel is about, usually invoking either drugs or politics. The true theme, I’m convinced, is spelled out in the opening epigram, taken from one of Jane Harrison’s books:

The Sirens stand, as it would seem, to the ancient and the modern, for the impulses in life as yet immortalised, imperious longings, ecstasies, whether of love or art, or philosophy, magical voices calling to a man from his “Land of Heart’s Desire,” and to which if he hearken it may be that he will return no more—voices, too, which, whether a man sail by or stay to hearken, still sing on.

Which is a theme worthy of the extreme liberties that fantasy takes with conventional reality.

By my reading, the climax of *Lud-in-the-Mist* is a reenactment of the Eleusinian Mysteries. If so, then this is its point of commonality with Mirrlees’s one great poem (she wrote many minor ones), which gives a daylong ramble through the streets and ages of Paris the same formal descent into the underworld, culminating in the sun rising out of midnight. Here’s how it begins:

I want a holophrase
 NORD-SUD
 ZIG-ZAG
 LION NOIR
 CACAO BLOOKER

Black-figured vases in Etruscan tombs

RUE DU BAC (DUBONNET)
 SOLFERINO (DUBONNET)
 CHAMBRE DES DEPUTES

Brekekekek coax coax we are passing
 under the Seine

DUBONNET

I can see you quail in horror. It helps to know Nord-Sud is an underground railway connecting Montparnasse and Montmartre and also the name of a Dadaist journal; that the other capitalized words are posters and the names of stations; that the vases were a particular interest of Harrison, with whom Mirrlees shared rooms; and that “Brekekekek coax coax,” is part of the chorus from Aristophanes’ *The Frogs* and is also intended to suggest the clacking of train wheels on the rails. But while the rest of the poem is easier to follow, it always requires work. I had to read it dozens of times before I felt qualified to pass judgment on it.

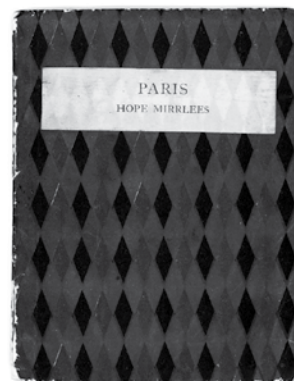
Still, when I did, I deemed it brilliant.

Everyone who has studied this poem in depth, incidentally, has concluded that it had to have been an influence on T. S. Eliot, who was a close personal friend and whose verse was all written in traditional forms at the time “Paris: A Poem” came out. Their mutual friend, Virginia Woolf, would certainly have given him a copy. But when asked, late in life, whether Eliot had read it, Mirrlees, typically, replied that the subject had never come up.

Let’s go back to that first line, however, “I want a holophrase.” A holophrase is a single word that expresses a whole phrase or combination of ideas. Right at the

There are many pleasures to be found in Mirrlees’s novel.... But its greatest pleasure lies in the unforeseeable twists and turns the plot takes.

[T]he climax of Lud-in-the-Mist is a reenactment of the Eleusinian Mysteries.... [T]his is its point of commonality with Mirrlees’s one great poem..., which gives a daylong ramble through the streets and ages of Paris the same formal descent into the underworld, culminating in the sun rising out of midnight.



(cont. on p. 11)

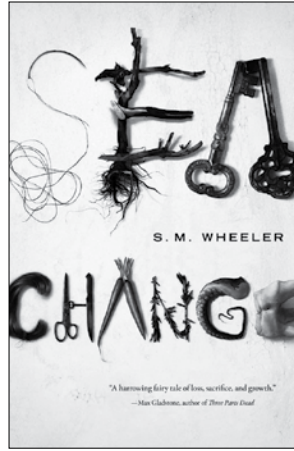


☼ Lush, Disciplined, and Hyper-Real

Sea Change by S.M. Wheeler,

Tor Books, June 2013, 304 pp., \$24.99.

reviewed by Nisi Shawl



“what terrible things hid[e] beneath tender skin, mounds like monstrous slugs blued by veins and covered over in a newborn’s gloss of blood” (p. 82). In exchange for these viscera Lilly receives accurate information. But finding her friend is not the same as freeing him. To accomplish this she must hunt for a dead tailor who makes magical coats; to acquire his services she must indenture herself to murdering bandits

The story’s surface is that of a fantasy in the style of the Brothers Grimm. But the lambent surfaces of those tales of woodcutters, homemakers, and fishermen shift to reveal moody depths....

Its beautiful cover is worthy of this book. At once rude and artistic, it depicts the concept of depiction using items crucial to the contents: scissors, keys, a lock of hair, a tooth, roots, a tentacle, a curving needle, rosemary sprigs, and dead, peeling twigs form the letters of its title, ornate upon a stark ground of cracked white paint. The letters are embossed, inviting tactile confirmation of their smoothness, their tangles, their delicacy—even the needle’s thread raises itself to be touched.

Sea Change is Wheeler’s first novel. The story’s surface is that of a fantasy in the style of the Brothers Grimm. But the lambent surfaces of those tales of woodcutters, homemakers, and fishermen shift to reveal moody depths, and *Sea Change* turns by fine gradations from a window onto a realm of plausibly mundane magic into an entrance way. Reading it is like walking home to wonder.

Lilly, offspring of a supposedly happy-ever-after coupling, survives the acid-drenched hate her parents’ love has dwindled down to with the help of a secret friend she finds on the beach. The friend, Octavius, is a child like she is, but the spawn of giant kraken rather than of an ennobled soldier and an enchanted village girl. Daily the two children share with each other knowledge of their separate worlds: sharks and horses, selkies and pagan feasts. When Lilly is sixteen, Octavius has grown too large to live near the sea’s shore, so their meetings are less frequent—sometimes coming as much as a week apart. When she is eighteen Lilly leaves her broken home in search of the absent Octavius, missing for over two months.

Bargaining with a troll to learn her friend’s whereabouts, Lilly loses her reproductive organs in a scene as remarkable for its raw egg-white clarity as for its gruesomeness. She holds apart the slit made in her belly by the troll’s dirty claws and sees

and a skinless witch, and so on. One quest leads to another. Tasks sprout further tasks. And nothing is as easy as deciding it must be done; everything takes time and trouble. Wheeler lovingly notes the blisters born of chopping wood, the tired resentment festering between criminals constrained to spend years in one another’s company, the three full days of labor needed to dig a grave in frozen earth.

The author of *Sea Change* includes details often skipped in more conventional fairytales. There is much that is tangible and tasteable, and much to be smelled. The dead tailor’s housekeeper feeds Lilly biscuits “lemon-bright, hazelnut-rich” (p. 109). A false charm, a “somewhat preserved” dog’s nose, has a “greasy, putrid texture, the scent alike to stomach acid” (p. 141).

While it’s tempting to dwell exclusively on this book’s sensory power, it has other strengths. Among these is its valuation of friendship over romantic and sexual love. Lilly feels the distracting temptation of lust embodied by the “dark-wife” Ermentrud, but refuses to succumb to it. The two kiss and Lilly enjoys “the heat of her mouth, the press of her smooth lips... the sensation of Ermentrud’s fingernails running lightly against her scalp, the dark-wife’s breasts pressed against her arm” (p. 269). Yet she refuses to yield up her soul to this “predator,” as Lilly deems her, or to give her anything except what’s required for Octavius’s release.

An argument could be made that Lilly’s neutering early in the novel takes Wheeler’s representation of gender along explicitly anti-essentialist paths. Though the narrative refers several times to what happens as the loss of reproductive ability, secondary and tertiary sexual characteristics



are lost as well: external genitalia, breasts, hair. Cultural defaults cause most people Lilly encounters after this to classify her as a boy; she takes the *nom de guerre* “Lyle,” but continues to identify as female. (She refuses to label herself “it” because she views depriving herself of any sexual identity at all as committing a form of theft.) Some do acknowledge the gender she claims despite appearances: a talking stag; the witch; and one thousand soldierly automata who obey only the bandits among men, but follow instructions given by any woman.

Finally, there is *Sea Change*’s meta-commentary. “If this were a fairy story,” the witch’s familiar theorizes, “then the stag would offer to let himself be killed” (p. 176). Excusing the ease with which fictional characters perform their tasks, this same familiar explains that “storytellers are not so much lying as making their tales enduring” (p. 249).

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(cont. from p. 9)

outset—but I wager no first-time reader ever picked up on this—Mirrlees forthrightly declared her intention: to fill that want. The rest of the poem is the process of creating a holophrase by her seemingly random but actually cunningly constructed ramble through the streets and museums of Paris, encountering its layers of history, the “grand guignol” of Catholic ritual, the fresh social wounds of the Great War, the politics of the time, high and low culture, the taxicabs, the lesbian clubs, the smells, the whores, the ghosts...and many, many things more.

All this takes place on May 1, 1919, the day of the General Strike and a feast day consecrated to the Virgin Mary. As the day shades into night, sexual references appear and then thicken, culminating in a night of “talk, talk, talk,” and then an ecstatic vision of the sun rising over the city.

By the final line, the poem has become the holophrase Mirrlees was seeking, and Paris itself has become, as the title promised, “a poem.”

Where *Lud-in-the-Mist* was about magic, “Paris: A Poem” is itself a work of magic.

The rediscovery of Hope Mirrlees continues. In academia, the examination of her work is a growth area. Several editions

But Wheeler expects her readers to endure much. She doesn’t skirt difficulties or downplay unpleasantness. Lilly, reflecting on what she has heard about her father and mother killing an enormous, mountaintop-encircling snake during their courtship, wonders how they disposed of the monster’s corpse. The story, she decides, should have been told. In this book its corollaries are; we’re spared nothing. In return for our acceptance we receive a rich reward: a fantasy world made hyper-real, conveyed to us in words at once lush and disciplined. Describing the end of one encounter with the dark-wife, Wheeler writes: “It was not that the woman left; she merely turned her attention away, and in doing so became another stretch of grassy bank” (p. 170). Since many other descriptions are of prosaic or outright ugly things, this lovely deliquescence melts with truth. So, in sum, does *Sea Change*.

exist of *Lud-in-the-Mist*, and it is regularly brought back into print. “Paris: A Poem,” can be found in *Collected Poems* by Hope Mirrlees, edited by Sandeep Parmar, along with lesser works and several essays. The introduction to that book contains the best information available about Mirrlees’s life and work. Fortunately, Parmar is working on a full-length biography.

After the death of Harrison, Mirrlees converted to Catholicism—whence the bowdlerization of her own poem, which contained blasphemies that few people, however devout, would be offended by today—and spent the remaining decades of her long life working on a biography of the Elizabethan antiquarian Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, rewriting it into a density that is close to unreadable. It is easy to deplore this squandering of her brilliance. But even if it were possible to go back in time to urge her to turn her energies toward another fantasy novel or more modernist poetry, it is doubtful anything could be accomplished. Hope Mirrlees was a woman who for her entire adult life did exactly what she wanted to do with little discernible regard for the advice of others. She might have listened, but it’s doubtful she would have obeyed.

Still, in her prime Mirrlees created two important works of literature. Most writers have not even created one.

Wheeler expects her readers to endure much. She doesn’t skirt difficulties or downplay unpleasantness....

In return for our acceptance we receive a rich reward: a fantasy world made hyper-real, conveyed to us in words at once lush and disciplined.

Nisi Shawl’s story collection *Filter House* (Aqueduct Press, 2008) won the James Tiptree, Jr. Award. Since 1999 she has reviewed science fiction for *The Seattle Times*. She was WisCon 35’s Guest of Honor.

Where Lud-in-the-Mist was about magic, “Paris: A Poem” is itself a work of magic.

[I]n her prime Mirrlees created two important works of literature. Most writers have not even created one.

Michael Swanwick has received the Hugo, Nebula, and Theodore Sturgeon and World Fantasy Awards for his work. His stories have appeared in numerous venues and many have been reprinted in Best of Year anthologies. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and son.



☸ Space Age Tricksters—Bold and Brassy

Big Mama Stories by Eleanor Arnason,

Aqueduct Press, July 2013, 172 pp., \$16.00/pb, \$9.95/ebk.

reviewed by Andrea Hairston

The Big Mamas are women who take care of business, no matter how vast, small, or complex it is.

The Big Mamas are not daunted by quantum uncertainty, time paradoxes, or the metaphysical mayhem they and other Big Beings engender. These space-age tricksters solve the unsolvable.

*Arnason is an SF stand-up comic and political artist. In *Big Mama Stories*, she works to make the invisible social forces that regulate and define our realities and universes visible.*

In her latest collection, *Big Mama Stories*, Eleanor Arnason does tall-tale physics and trickster bio-chem. She creates a bold and brassy crew of Big Mamas who come in all colors, wear exploding-galaxy earrings, and dance on the arrow of time to when/where ever they please. Big Poppas exist, but not at the center of these stories. The Big Mamas are women who take care of business, no matter how vast, small, or complex it is. They mix it up with every kind of creature—viruses, insectoid spacefarers, bacteria, and Midwesterners. The Big Mamas are not daunted by quantum uncertainty, time paradoxes, or the metaphysical mayhem they and other Big Beings engender. These space-age tricksters solve the unsolvable.

Read this book. The mix of hard SF, mythic yarn, and comic-book adventure is surprising, funny, and wise. In each story, an over-the-top but down-to-earth Big Mama confronts a mythic, marvelous challenge. There's Tentacle Man, who wants to consume supersize Big Mama beauty; a Zk prince floats in space and gets wrecked by the sight of Big Mama ugliness; Big Green Mama falls in love with her Big Mama beautiful self and makes copies to love; Big Red Mama wrangles with other time travelers for peace and sensuous thrills in the Cretaceous.

In the final and longest story of the collection, Big Brown Mama meets Brer Rabbit. An early 20th century conjure woman puts a spell on Brer Rabbit. The conjure woman gives him an African American man's body so that they can escape the boll-weevil devastated countryside. They travel the rails from the rural South to industrial Detroit. The conjure woman works the weeds and casts spells for people. The Rabbit-Man works the assembly line for Henry Ford, loves women and jazz, joins the union, but can't quite figure out how to be rabbit again—or be rabbit with a man's memories. The Rabbit-Man seeks aid from the magical Ojibwa being Nanabozho and his grandmother, Noko-



mis, and finally turns to Big Brown Mama. She has to figure out how to take the trick off the trickster and leave him whole, so she whisks him off to a future Moon base. This ambitious story takes Brer Rabbit, our historic, mythic, playful consciousness, out to the stars and a future of space colonies, gene art bodies, space jazz, and hard-earned hope. This story was my favorite. I loved the complexity, philosophy, history, future speculation, and sheer fun!

Who knows what your favorite might be?

Read this book. I like being a reviewer and saying that. What's a review for if not to urge readers to find their next good book? Get *Big Mama Stories* for the hope and the humor. If one story, style, or character doesn't suit your fancy, keep going. Each story enriches the next one. Every other page I had to laugh out loud. The image of Greek philosophers eaten by prehistoric fauna before they stepped in the ever-changing river was particularly enjoyable.


The narrative voice spinning yarns, offering asides, and poking at characters and the reader/audience has to be a Big Mama too. This Big Mama narrator is pretty omniscient, informing us in footnotes if need be: *This is not BS*, the first footnote declares—in case the reader is tempted to think social forces are less daunting than T-Rexes. Indeed, social forces are more of a challenge than time paradoxes and naked singularities.

OK. Arnason is an SF stand-up comic and political artist. In *Big Mama Stories*, she works to make the invisible social forces that regulate and define our realities and universes visible. When an artist makes the



invisible visible she always runs the risk of being labeled polemic, preachy, or didactic. In current Western aesthetic traditions, it is often taken for granted that *ars est ce-lare artem*—true art conceals rather than reveals. Artful deception is not simply tolerated but celebrated, and direct speech is suspect, dismissed as a flaw, or frequently reviled. This aesthetic valuing of artful deception—sneak the truth on me—is not universal or absolute. Many West African theatre traditions, for example, value direct speech over covert manipulation. Powerful empires rely on the invisible magic of cultural values, the ignorance of history, and the mystification of the status quo. If you wish to tell stories that critique such empires, what’s a girl to do?

Make sure you have as much fun as Eleanor Arnason.

 **Colonialism, Cultural Imperialism, and Moral Complications**
We See a Different Frontier: A Postcolonial Speculative Fiction Anthology
 edited by Fabio Fernandes and Djibril al-Ayad,

Futurefire.net Publishing, August 2013, 248 pp., \$14.65/pb, \$5.00/ebk.

reviewed by Cynthia Ward

Statements of purpose don’t get much more direct than the description posted at <http://djibrilalayad.blogspot.com/p/we-see-different-frontier.html>: “This anthology of speculative fiction stories on the themes of colonialism and cultural imperialism focuses on the viewpoints of the colonized. Sixteen authors share their experiences of being the silent voices in history and on the wrong side of the final frontier; their fantasies of a reality in which straight, cis, able-bodied, rich, anglophone, white males don’t get to tell us how they won every war; their revenge against the alien oppressor settling their ‘new world.’”

The anthology’s goal is worthy and intriguing. And in general the anthology’s description accurately reflects its contents. Sometimes, politically conceived fiction results in thinly disguised polemics; but that’s not the case for these sixteen stories.

If fiction is about “when the chickens come home to roost,” then the opening story, “The Arrangement of Their Parts” by writer Shweta Narayan, comes closer than most to literalizing the metaphor, since it

SF is the genre of ideas. The presentation and explication of technology is a valued, celebrated feature of this genre. Story is one of our most significant technologies. Through story we transform the universe we inhabit and ourselves. Arnason’s investigation of the stories we tell on ourselves (our histories, mythologies, tall tales, SF dreams, and space age fantasies) is entertaining and compelling. She crafts surprisingly complex characters to unravel the twists of human relations, social constructions, and power dynamics. Despite humanity’s destructive tendencies, Arnason believes there is hope. I don’t mean happy-ever-after false optimism, but the delightful, surprising possibility that we can survive ourselves and reach into the stars.

Oh. And let me just say again, read *Big Mama Stories!*

Arnason’s investigation of the stories we tell on ourselves (our histories, mythologies, tall tales, SF dreams, and space age fantasies) is entertaining and compelling.

Andrea Hairston is author of two novels published by Aqueduct Press: *Redwood and Wildfire* (2011; winner of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award) and *Mindscape* (2006; shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick and the James Tiptree, Jr. Awards, and winner of the Carl Brandon Parallax Award).

features a vengeful avian protagonist. The Artificer Devi, an East Indian woman whose name means “Divine” in Sanskrit and whose embodiment is a clockwork creation, comes to seventeenth-century Surat in search of an Englishman who pursues her art, but in reverse: he destroys clockwork beings, while she creates them. The narrative braids their encounter with the cautionary fable Devi tells him about four Brahmins more arrogant than wise. The Englishman ignores Devi’s warning and suffers the consequences. His simplistic villainy somewhat blunts the sting in the story’s tail, since it leaves the narrative speeding straightforwardly to its conclusion. While the Englishman’s arrogant behavior is believable, a moment’s consideration before he carried on with his Raj assumptions would have expanded his characterization beyond one dimension and made the ending less predictable. As a result “The Arrangement of Their Parts” falls short of greatness, but it’s a very good, highly enjoyable tale of revenge.

The second story, like the first, challenges the stereotype of steampunk as white



The anthology’s goal is worthy and intriguing.... Sometimes, politically conceived fiction results in thinly disguised polemics; but that’s not the case for these sixteen stories.

(cont. on p. 14)



Colonialism, Cultural Imperialism, and Moral Complications (cont. from p. 13)

Three of the contributions fall squarely in the subgenre of post-apocalyptic dystopia, yet, like the steampunk stories, they are very different from one another.

imperialist nostalgia. In “Pancho Villa’s Flying Circus,” the notorious inventor Tesla has produced a death ray, and the Mexican Revolutionary general Pancho Villa is putting it to use. This, in the hands of a lesser author, would be the climax. In cyberpunk novelist Ernest Hogan’s recom-boculturally gonzo alternate history, it’s merely the beginning of an invasion that will change Hollywood, arguably the most insidious imperialist tool the U.S. has ever produced. Hogan’s critique is sharp and the protagonist’s success is sweet, in the anthology’s most fun and funny story (an observation that will surprise few of Hogan’s fans).

Three of the contributions fall squarely in the subgenre of post-apocalyptic dystopia, yet, like the steampunk stories, they are very different from one another. Joyce Chng’s magic-realist “Lotus” is set in a future where global warming is so severe the characters must traverse cities by watercraft. The story is somewhat uneven; the Singaporean protagonist’s discovery of fresh water and food in an abandoned hotel seems improbable for a number of reasons, and she and her Euro-American lover’s ultimate decision seems too easily won, given how rarely humans make identical choices in desperate circumstances. However, Cecily and Si are sympathetic, likeable characters as they wrestle with the differences between need and want.

The apocalypse of Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s “Them Ships” is an invasion by extraterrestrials who, in a deliberate echo of past colonial invasions, come to help the benighted natives. How this help is received depends on how badly each individual’s sociocultural ox is being gored; and one character’s failure to grasp the new reality intersects dangerously with the insights of a young Mexico City garbage picker, who has no formal education but is supremely capable of comparing opposing oppressors. The story plays out in a manner not wholly surprising, but entirely believable and chilling.

The apocalypse that almost but not quite destroyed all technology in Sandra McDonald’s “Fleet” is a night of solar megafares. The main character, a trans woman named Isa, is a “Bridge”—a title that suggests she works to reestablish contact with other post-collapse cultures. But

actually, Bridges’ duties include defending Guam’s shores and remembering the thousands killed during the apocalypse. The shore defense operates in ways even Isa doesn’t entirely grasp, paving the path to an ending that truly surprises and disturbs. If not the anthology’s most complex story, “Fleet” is its most morally ambiguous; add to this the sympathetic, shades-of-gray characterizations, and you’re left with a story where neither Guam’s defenders nor the colonialists are villains—and all are. The story haunts long after it finishes.

While the descriptions above may suggest otherwise, the anthology ranges across genres and themes, continents and worlds. In the near-future Singapore of J.Y. Yang’s “Old Domes,” Jing-Li “culls” colonial-era buildings, or, more precisely, their guardian spirits/genius loci; new at her job, Jing-Li ultimately arrives at a more nuanced understanding of both her calling and the history of her city. In the rising Ghana of co-editor Fabio Fernandes’s cyberpunk-edged hard science fiction story, “How to Make a Time Machine Do Things That Are Not in the Manual; or, the Gambiarra Method,” the old colonial powers have fallen, but this is no apocalypse for the descendants of the colonized who form the globe-trotting new technological elite; however, the corporate politics and bosses remain the same. Another morally complicated story, Rahul Kanakia’s “Droplet,” takes a unique approach: It portrays the return to America of an immigrant family that repatriated to rising India as the U.S. fell prey to the worsening global climate. The family finds revisiting the U.S. and their immigrant ex-neighbors to be far more difficult, involved, and troubling than they’ve led their Stanford-bound son to expect.

Though not every story is as subtle or accomplished as “Droplet,” or “Old Domes,” or “Fleet,” the overall quality of the anthology is high. This strength is unlikely to surprise readers familiar with the coeditors’ backgrounds: Fabio Fernandes is a two-time recipient of the Argos Science Fiction Award (Brazil), a translator whose numerous credits include *Neuromancer* and *The Steampunk Bible*, and the former coeditor of bilingual online magazine *Terra Incognita*, while his coeditor is the writer, futurist, and historian Djibril al-

© 14 [T]he anthology ranges across genres and themes, continents and worlds.

The entire book and many of its stories deserve inclusion on award ballots and in the best-of-the-year lists and anthologies for 2013.



Ayad, General Editor of *The Future Fire*, the online magazine of social-political speculative fiction and publisher of *We See a Different Frontier*. Further strength comes from the nonfiction contributions—the coeditors’ Introduction, the multiple-award-winning author Aliette de Bodard’s Preface, and the World Fantasy Award-winning editor/author Ekaterina Sedia’s Critical Afterword—which offer

sometimes-painfully piercing insight into the themes and realities of colonialism and imperialism.

But it’s not only for its subject and themes and its presentation of oft-excluded perspectives that *We See a Different Frontier* is essential. The entire book and many of its stories deserve inclusion on award ballots and in the best-of-the-year lists and anthologies for 2013.

SF and Fantasy in Mind-Expanding Mix

One Small Step: An Anthology of Discoveries edited by Tehani Wessely, Fablecroft, May 2013, 320 pp., \$15.95

reviewed by Karen Burnham

Looking at the cover (I know; I should know better) I see the title: *One Small Step: An Anthology of Discoveries*. Armed with this call-out to Neil Armstrong’s walk on the Moon, I expect a science fiction anthology about finding new things “out there” to explore and relate to. That turns out to be only one small piece of what this anthology has in mind. Along with extra-solar planets and aliens there are discoveries to be made about ourselves and the people around us. This volume mixes SF and fantasy indiscriminately, and though it took me awhile to leave behind my expectations, I’m really glad I did. There are many rewards inside for those approaching with a mind open to broadening.

The first story, “Always Greener” by Michelle Marquardt, is an excellent example of exactly what I was expecting. A young girl on a recently colonized planet has found the crashed survivors of another alien race who are battling humans for ownership. A truce is about to be declared, so she and a friend bring the aliens things they can use. Back home, she’s been told that her father died in the war, but later we learn that wasn’t the whole story. She and her mother are estranged, and as a constant backdrop to the story’s action there’s razor-sharp fast-growing alien grass, always ready to maim or kill the unwary. This is a great story, balancing an alien world, other aliens, and the alienation within a family; it’s like a good worldbuilding story from *Analog* but with three-dimensional characters and relationships added. The ending dips perhaps a little close to schmaltz for

my comfort, but overall I was very happy to read it.

The second story, “By Blood and Incantation,” by Lisa L. Hannett and Angela Slatter, was such a contrast that it just about did my head in. This is a fantasy story that gets right down into the muck: mud and dirt and blood and lots of tactile and olfactory descriptions, along with a core of fairly unsympathetic characters. It centers on a woman who provides various remedies to the local community but who demands recompense. Two women come to her with two different complaints, but distracted by her own problems her remedies for them go awry. This story gives an interesting yet disturbing view in the round of three different perspectives on failed child rearing: someone trying to get rid of an unwanted baby, someone failing to conceive a wanted one, and someone mourning the loss of a wanted child. It is an intense and frankly unpleasant story, but a valuable one.

After that, my expectations were blown wide open. Nothing could surprise me, and I left myself in the capable hands of the editor, Tehani Wessely. And I’m so glad I did, because I was able to enjoy fantastic stories such as “Winter’s Heart” by Faith Mudge. This is a tale of a woman seeking a wizard in his castle that I read as commentary on postpartum depression (a topic not much found in SF/F, I’ve noticed). Another contributor, Tansy Rayner Roberts, never fails to impress and entertain, and in “Cold White Daughter” she imagines that the White Witch of Narnia has a daughter who survives the events of *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and what happens

Cynthia Ward has published stories in numerous anthologies and magazines. With Nisi Shawl, she coauthored *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* (Aqueduct Press, 2005). She is completing a novel. She lives in Los Angeles.



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(cont. on p. 17)

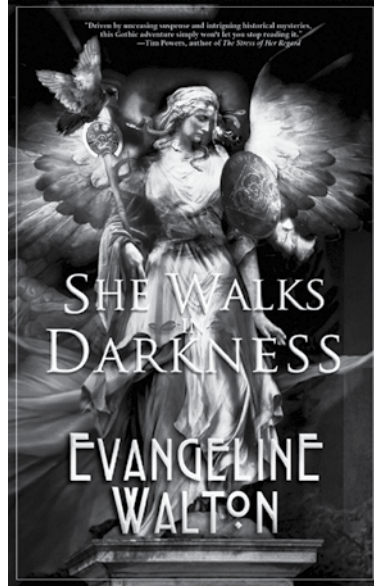


☸ She Walks In a Darkness...of Her Own Making

She Walks in Darkness by Evangeline Walton, Tachyon, September 2013, 192 pp., \$14.95.

reviewed by Caren Gussoff

Published posthumously, Evangeline Walton's novella She Walks in Darkness drinks deeply from the well of gothica...



Published posthumously, Evangeline Walton's novella *She Walks in Darkness* drinks deeply from the well of gothica: its elements include a crumbling castle in a ruined landscape; sinister secrets bound to the misdeeds of long-dead ancestors; a pair of well-fed innocents whose love is tested by a seductive villain; and the villain himself, a curdled example of pure evil on Earth.

In this specific case, Professor Richard and Barbara Keyes, newlyweds, arrive in rural, isolated Tuscany, a countryside scorched barren from within by underground volcanoes. Richard and his bride are to spend the summer at Villa Carenni, studying the remains of the underground catacombs built by the native Etruscans a thousand years earlier. The catacombs lie beneath the villa, but the influence of the ancient Etruscan society is as palpable in the small town as it was before the Romans. The villagers are still bound by its complicated hierarchies of breeding and honor, and are close-lipped concerning the fantastical urban myths about undiscovered Etruscan treasure hidden deep in the subterranean labyrinths, as well as the horrific rumors regarding the murderous tendencies of the villa's great owner, Prince Mino Carenni.

Richard and Barbara find the villa empty, and the action unfolds dependably. Richard has an accident and sustains a serious head injury, which leaves him unconscious, while Barbara discovers the body of the murdered villa caretaker at the bottom of the cellar stairs. She is too afraid, too weak, and knows too little Italian to get help, and instead dithers between sobbing over Richard and sobbing in the cellar. When the caretaker's body disappears, Barbara goes through the meat grinder, seemingly never to be whole again. Then a beautiful local Lothario, Floriano, comes to the Villa looking for the caretaker.

It takes exactly ten minutes of action before Barbara is tempted by the fruits of her young Italian savior. However, her desire doesn't portray her as a fleshly woman who is sensually aware. Instead, she seems to bend towards any man like a daisy towards the sun, and since her husband is out for the count, Floriano qualifies simply by showing up and seeming to want to help. Though Barbara ultimately rejects Floriano's aggressive advances, she does so with the force of an overcooked noodle. In fact, though things quickly go off the proverbial rails, the most authentic tension of the story develops from Floriano's rapeyness, as well as the fact that Richard is allowed to sleep while suffering an obvious concussion.

As the plot thickens, so does Barbara. It's not just that Walton closely follows genre conventions; it is that the reader can see the twists miles ahead of Barbara. Having a fool for a narrator can be an effective tool for constructing an excellently unreliable narrative, but in a romantic gothic mystery it's the narrative's undoing. We are not frightened with Barbara, we are not surprised with her, and we do not feel horror as the story literally descends into the depths of Hell. Barbara is a woman of all exclamation points and question marks, and so the power of the brutality that lies at the core of the murder, the accident, and the mythology of Prince Mino is never given its due. The careful research Walton conducted about the ways and lives of

Having a fool for a narrator can be an effective tool for constructing an excellently unreliable narrative, but in a romantic gothic mystery it's the narrative's undoing.... the power of the brutality that lies at the core of the murder, the accident, and the mythology of Prince Mino is never given its due.



the ancient Etruscans and artfully wove into the book is stripped thin as it filters through Barbara to the reader. Stripped thinner is the reader's hope that Barbara will rise as the hero, growing stronger even as she grows weaker.

Walton (1907 - 1996) was known for the visionary, gender-fucking characters in her Mabinogion tetralogy. She herself was a feminist and pioneer, living as an independent, progressive artist working in an (at the time) overwhelmingly male genre. For those fans who know her thusly, *She Walks in Darkness* will prove a let-down. As a trifle, a perfectly formed, predictable specimen of the gothic lit that begat B movies, it's a perfect draught.

Walton...was known for the visionary, gender-fucking characters in her Mabinogion tetralogy.... For those fans who know her thusly, She Walks in Darkness will prove a let-down.

Caren Gussoff is an SF writer living in Seattle. She's the author of *Homecoming* (2000), and *The Wave and Other Stories* (2003). Her new novel, *The Birthday Problem*, will be published by Pink Narcissus Press in 2014. Find her online at spitkitten.com.

SF and Fantasy in Mind-Expanding Mix (cont. from p. 15)

to her afterwards. "Firefly Epilogue" by Jodi Cleghorn is an interesting story that reveals its premise quite gradually; difficult to describe without spoilers, but I enjoyed both the pace of the reveal and the overall tone of it. "Shadows" by Kate Gordon concerns a young girl and her widowed father and the Shadows that accompany her; I especially appreciated the poetry that it includes. "The Ways of the Wyrding Women" by Rowena Cory Daniells is a fantastic tale of the intersection of many different kinds of power: political, patriarchal, magical, feminine, matriarchal. Like "By Blood and Incantation" it is not an easy story to read, but it packs a lot into its short length.

In any anthology not every story will work perfectly for every reader. One of my current pet peeves is stories that read more like fragments than complete tales, and that's a charge I'll level at "Indigo Gold" by Deborah Biancotti, as much as I love the heroine of this investigative-journalism-meets-paranormal-phenomenon story. Likewise, Cat Sparks's "Daughters of Battendown," an interesting look at a girl discovering the previously unglimped context of her society, left me with some unanswered questions.

But a wise editor like Wessely will choose stories such that the reader ends on a high note, and the final two stories do not disappoint. "Ella and the Flame" by Kathleen Jennings and "Morning Star" by DK Mok are two entirely different tales of people soldiering on in intolerable circumstances without giving up hope or giving in to despair. Both authors come very close to melodrama but manage to escape its clutches, instead giving us two views of strength and love. "Morning Star" especially, returning to the science fictional milieu I had expected to find originally, warmed my heart.

Some anthologies have a very narrow interpretation of a theme and hew to it closely. Others take a broader view, expanding every which way and introducing the reader to perspectives she may never have considered. While this was not the anthology I was expecting, it was an anthology I was glad to read. Did I forget to mention that all the authors involved are Australian women? If so, it should come as no surprise, considering the strength of the output we've had from that quarter over the last few years. One notable absence here is Margo Lanagan, but no editor can ever get every story she wants. I will be looking forward to more Wessely anthologies and more stories by these authors, with eager anticipation.

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Karen Burnham is vocationally an engineer and avocationally a fiction writer. She works at NASA's Johnson Space Center as an electrical engineer. She edits *Locus* magazine's *Roundtable* blog.



⚙️ Conflicted Characters in Dangerous Encounters

Caution: Contains Small Parts by Kirstyn McDermott,

Twelfth Planet Press, June 2013, 173 pp., \$18.

reviewed by Kiini Ibura Salaam

Kirstyn McDermott engages the reader in a series of stories that are meditations on the fracturing aspects of life, the "small parts" if you will, that can build into a monsoon of transformation....

With only four stories, McDermott grounds you in her own brand of horror. It's a quiet kind that creeps up on you....

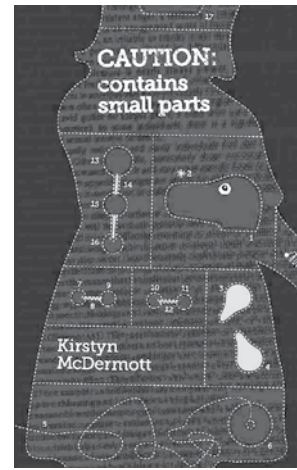
In the first story, "What Amanda Wants," the pas de deux between a therapist with an otherworldly skill and her mysterious new patient is intriguing....

Due to the intoxicating freedom the therapist feels after making her choice, the reader knows that something dangerous has been unleashed.

"The Home for Broken Dolls" is a fantastically compelling story that creates powerful connections to identity, trauma, self-ownership, misogyny, feminism, and self-worth.

In *Caution: Contains Small Parts*, award-winning speculative fiction author Kirstyn McDermott engages the reader in a series of stories that are meditations on the fracturing aspects of life, the "small parts" if you will, that can build into a monsoon of transformation—though it's not promised whether that transformation will be positive or negative. With only four stories, McDermott grounds you in her own brand of horror. It's a quiet kind that creeps up on you, like the process of picking a scab that begins with the benign removal of a few flaky bits and ends a bloody mess, retraumatizing that which has been scabbed over or—in the worst case—creating a larger, more dangerous wound.

In the first story, "What Amanda Wants," the *pas de deux* between a therapist with an otherworldly skill and her mysterious new patient is intriguing. McDermott maintains a delicious tension, doling out details that keep the reader engaged. The story of a character coming unhinged holds a special fascination because so many of us fear losing our grip. With the therapist rather than the patient careening out of control, the reader's expectation for juicy conflict mounts; however, McDermott chooses to implode, rather than explode, the momentum. The new patient's condition is empty, making her a dog with no bite. Consequently, the story doesn't pack as much punch as it could. Since the patient's storyline amounts to little more than a tale of the sort schoolchildren are told to warn them off the path of danger, the story's resonance is left to fall on the therapist's shoulders. Luckily, the creep factor of her final choice is terrifying: she must either take much-needed relief by incapacitating another or remain in debilitating pain. Due to the intoxicating freedom the therapist feels after making her choice, the reader knows that something dangerous has been unleashed. The story ends with the certainty that the patient is irrevocably damaged and that there will be others the



therapist leaves wandering this earth with permanently broken parts.

The second story, "Horn," forwards McDermott's thesis that when trauma is created anywhere its echoes remain everywhere—and none of us are safe from its reach. It does not, however, do much to forward the tone and timbre of the collection, as it is the most distant emotionally and experientially. While interesting from a conceptual perspective—the trauma an author inflicts in story worlds can resonate in real life—a new approach in the storytelling might have helped make it more personally engaging to the reader.

Terrifying and tender, the title story from the collection accurately captures the emptiness that so many of us walk around with. "Caution: Contains Small Parts" illuminates the ghosts of relationships past, considers who carries the burdens of the past, and warns that there is always something that remains. After thinking that he's completely free of his past, the main character of this third story learns that that which is left behind is not gone, and that there are some experiences you can never sever yourself from. At the end of "Caution: Contains Small Parts," the main character makes a heartwarming and transformative decision that ensures that he'll be living a bizarre, otherworldly home-life for years to come.

McDermott wraps up *Caution: Contains Small Parts* with the most engaging, fully imagined, and challenging story of the collection, the meaty "The Home for Broken Dolls." She creates a bizarrely imagined scenario, a place where human-sized dolls are rescued and reconstructed. When the dolls come to life, the house becomes a place of deep consternation and internal



agitation. Easily the longest story of the collection, “The Home for Broken Dolls” gives McDermott the space to create a satisfying sprawl full of layered ideas that twist and deepen as the story continues. McDermott keeps a tight rein on her themes and plot so that the landscape and power dynamics are constantly shifting and the reader’s understanding of the characters is ever-evolving. As the reader bumps into new revelations along the way, the boundaries of what she perceives to be its theme and intentions expands. “The Home for Broken Dolls” is a fantastically compelling story that creates powerful connections to identity, trauma, self-ownership, misogyny, feminism, and self-worth. I hope these multifaceted and striking characters are read widely. They harbor pain and dreams that stretch the story’s meta-conversation, gifting the reader with compelling juxtapositions that spark a rewarding friction

of enjoyment, wonder, laughter, and worry. “The Home for Broken Dolls” is without a doubt a story that deserves attention.

This whole collection is full of dangerous encounters between conflicted characters. All of them have secrets and personal horrors that they disguise. These are men and women who have agency, yet are completely isolated in their pain. Faced with swallowing their discomforts all on their own, they take action, believing that they understand what outcomes will result. In reality, none of us can control the full impact of our actions. Each choice ripples out and then rebounds back, washing over us and leaving us marked and changed. McDermott’s characters are no different. They are not safe from the world or from themselves.

This whole collection is full of dangerous encounters between conflicted characters.... Faced with swallowing their discomforts all on their own, they take action, believing that they understand what outcomes will result. In reality, none of us can control the full impact of our actions.

Kiini Ibura Salaam’s work encompasses speculative fiction, erotica, creative nonfiction, and poetry. *Ancient, Ancient*, a collection of her short fiction, was published in 2012 by Aqueduct Press.

a tipping point

by Gwynne Garfinkle

filling up the world with her man-sized swagger
tight trousers leaving everything
to the imagination

an opposite Ozma
gone from girl to Tip
to claim her kingdom

all for the love of a girl/boy
all for a wish to be convex
not cave

welcome to Oz where everything
is plausible

a change of name
a change of world
at long last to burst the seems-to-be

Gwynne Garfinkle lives in Los Angeles. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in such publications as *Strange Horizons*, *Interfictions*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Goblin Fruit*, and *Shimmer*.



Luisah Teish

Water & the Octopus

Creativity, like water, flows into every crack and crevice it encounters.

I grew up in a family of talented people. My father played piano and sang gospels in the A. M. E. Church of New Orleans. My mother sang the blues and was a handkerchief dancer during Mardi Gras. All my siblings are involved with the arts. We all have a love of story and an interest in spirituality.

As a child, my mother's friends asked me to sing to them over the telephone. Which I did happily. My favorite song line was "green door what's that secret you're keeping?"

Indeed I was enchanted by the waters of the Mississippi River and Bayou St. John, the trees heavy-laden with Spanish Moss, and the whipping wind and rain of late summer hurricanes. I loved the beautiful forest, on the west bank of the River, behind the land surrounding our home.

My mother bought me a simple set of watercolors, with three brushes, and a tablet. I started messing around, attempting to paint what I saw in my environment: water, snakes, trees, and the spirits roaming the land.

My father did not approve of my paintings, so he burned them and my supplies. About the same time as "the burning," I also endured the trauma of watching "The Company" murder the forest. The waterways were closed, the tadpoles and the trees died, and the great forest was replaced by miles of huge concrete and metal pipes used to channel oil, the blood of the bayou, into the coffers of Exxon and Texaco.

This wounding of the visual artist and her environment happened when I was 9 years old. In the decades that followed I channeled all my energy into the arts as a fashion model, dancer-choreographer, actress, writer, artistic director, and storyteller.

I modeled African inspired clothing, told stories about legendary figures of the diaspora, and danced for Damballah the Haitian Serpent deity. Once in a while I would dare to draw or paint something, then hide it in the closet before burning it myself. I internalized the trauma and oppression.



Fifty years later I found myself in the presence of artists who revealed the beauty they saw before them and the pain they felt inside of them. They were painters, sculptors, potters, designers, and fiber artists.

I give praise and thanks to all of them, especially Shiloh McCloud, Kathleen Gallagher, Uzuri Amini, and Gail Williams for their instruction, supplies, encouragement, and support.

Today I am a mixed-media octopus. I stand in the center of the swirling waters of my experience and emotions, and then I reach out from that center with several tentacles and grab hold of whatever is in my environment. I especially love incorporating recycled materials, coffee beans, buttons, old pennies, dried leaves, Styrofoam, and dead skin. These are my materials. Whatever gets caught in my tentacles is then pulled into the swirling waters of collage.

Sometimes I begin with a pre-conceived notion of what I want to create. These pieces are based on a myth; a dream, a story, or a message received from divination. At other times I approach the work with no idea what It and I are becoming. The pieces wake me up in the night, they hold me hostage, or they retire to other dimensions, abandoning me. I may resist but end up yielding, always surprised by what unfolds in front of me. That is my process.

Spirituality and the sacredness of nature flow like water into every crack and crevice of my work.

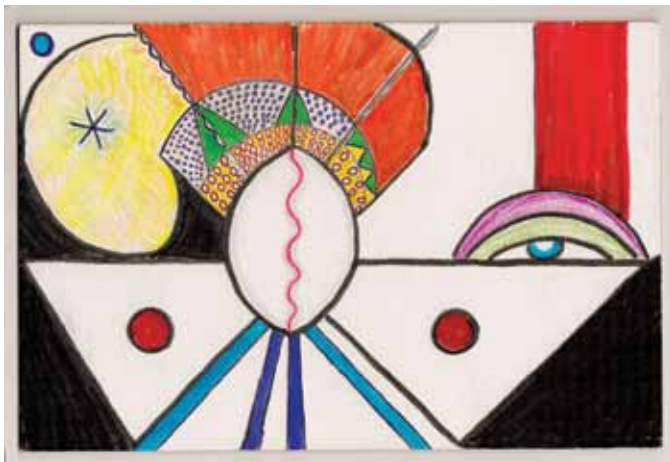




Water Walking. Tempera paint on paper



Her Ocean. Paint, lace, mirror pieces

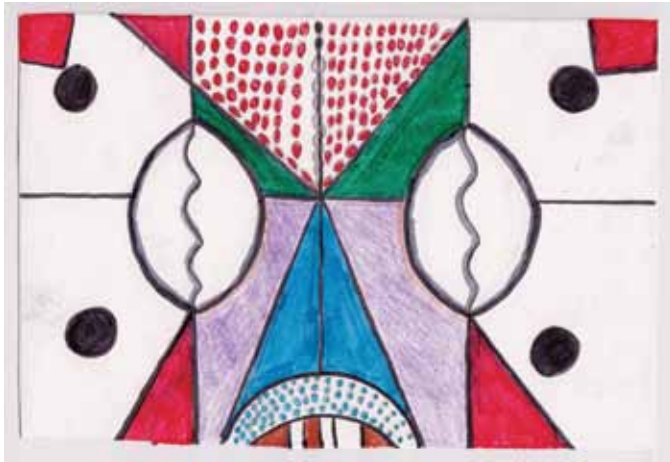


Odu Ifa. A World Begins with One

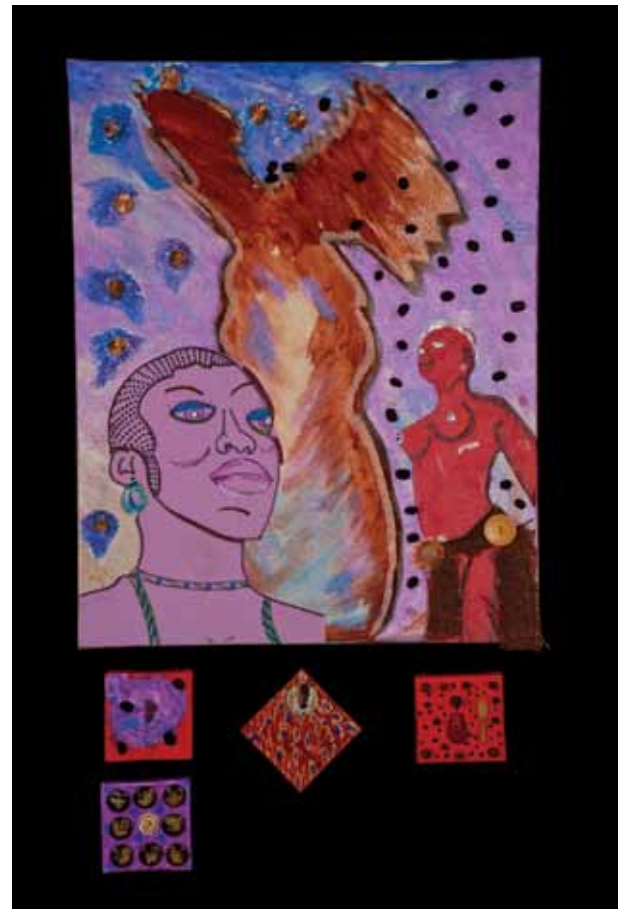


Odu Ifa: All roads lead to paradise





Odu Ifa: To anger the ancestors



Oshun Ibukole.
Paint, fabric, buttons, coffee beans, and pennies

“Since its launch in 2011 *The Cascadia Subduction Zone* has emerged as one of the best critical journals the field has to offer.”

☉ Jonathan McCalmont, February 18, 2013, Hugo Ballot Nomination

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