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Occupation ๑ Kristin Kest

IN THIS ISSUE

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

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Feminist World-Building: Toward Future Memory

by L. Timmel Duchamp

During the 1980s, feminists active in the 1960s and '70s became aware of patterns of forgetfulness that have repeatedly rendered the accomplishments of women and the process of feminism the work of Sisyphus. They learned, contrary to received wisdom, that women artists and writers had all along been producing brilliant gems, either to be minimized, misattributed to men artists and writers, or otherwise "forgotten." And they had begun, also, to uncover a long history of feminist and protofeminist struggle that had all but vanished from the historical record, sometimes only a handful of years afterward. Several works early in the decade, notably Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollack's *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (1981), Joanna Russ's *How To Suppress Women's Writing* (1983), and Dale Spender's *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Women's Intellectual Tradition* (1983), raised the obvious question of how so much artistry, intellect, and political work could have so thoroughly slipped from collective memory again and again. And many of us began to think about how we could prevent this from recurring. For by 1985, the backlash had arrived, and feminists had become easy objects of public ridicule and opprobrium, as they had apparently become in the 1930s, once women had achieved the vote in both Britain and the US.

My own thought, in 1986, was that feminists must include women of all generations, classes, and races, and that they must actively recruit younger women—and treat them as equals. I wrote an essay on the subject, at the invitation of an academic journal's board inspired by the comments I'd written on my renewal subscription form at the very moment they were planning the issue commemorating their tenth anniversary. The editor told me it would be the keynote essay opening the issue. As submitted, however, my essay reportedly caused dissension among board members and was returned to me in a nearly unrecognizable form. My letter withdrawing it elicited a long, emotional phone call from the editor, who persuaded me to agree to a "compromise" version. Neither of us was happy with the result. Instead of positioning it as the keynote essay, the editor placed it at the back of a double issue packed with celebratory pieces, an isolated oddity, while I thought of it as an embarrassment to be banished from active memory. In forgetting it, I also forgot my insight that feminism needed younger feminists, with all that that meant. I did not recollect it even when a decade later generational issues became bitterly prominent (and notorious) in the academy. Recalling it now, though, I realize that my insight clearly informs my joy that WisCon has been growing both younger and more diverse since at least 2000.

My own thought, in 1986, was that feminists must include women of all generations, classes, and races, and that they must actively recruit younger women — and treat them as equals.

Along with maintaining continuity across generations, another important means for safeguarding us from losing consciousness of the history we need to thrive is that urged by Liz Henry during a WisCon panel in 2006: "Document, document, document." This exhortation planted the seed from which grew the WisCon Chronicles, now up to seven volumes, and its urgency informs many of my publishing decisions.

Along with maintaining continuity across generations, another important means for safeguarding us from losing consciousness of the history we need to thrive is that urged by Liz Henry during a WisCon panel in 2006: "Document, document, document."

Among its various missions, academic feminism, one of the most successful institutions in the US arising from 1970s feminism, importantly aims to maintain continuity across generations and to preserve the history of women's activities and accomplishments. I recall attending meetings in the mid-1970s, as a graduate student, for the formation of a women's studies program at the University of Illinois. I could not then have imagined the extent the influence of such programs, springing up across the continent, would come to have—nor even that any of them would have taken such deep root in the academy as to be thriving forty years later. And I certainly couldn't have imagined myself participating in the fortieth anniversary celebration of the University of Oregon's Center for the Study of

I recall attending meetings in the mid-1970s…for the formation of a women's studies program at the University of Illinois. I could not then have imagined the extent the influence of such programs, springing up across the continent, would come to have….

Cont. on p. 2

Feminist World-Building (cont. from p. 1)

I certainly couldn't have imagined myself participating in the fortieth anniversary celebration of the University of Oregon's Center for the Study of Women in Society.... From the vantage of 2013, however, the most remarkable aspect of the celebration in Eugene was its deliberate joining of a feminist vision of its own (feminist) past to a feminist imagination of (feminist) futures.

During Ursula's reading and Q&A, the atmosphere was both electric and reverent. Feminists tend not to idolize individual women, perhaps because recognizing the dangers of the pedestal is one of the earliest lessons of Feminism 101. But this feeling so many of us have about Ursula is nothing like idealization: it goes far, far deeper than that.

Women in Society, as I did in Eugene in November 2013.

From the vantage of 2013, however, the most remarkable aspect of the celebration in Eugene was its deliberate joining of a feminist vision of its own (feminist) past to a feminist imagination of (feminist) futures. The celebration was accordingly organized into two symposia, one sampling the CSWS's past work, one sampling the visions of fsf (feminist science fiction) and the possibilities for preserving, reading, and understanding those visions through the rich, accumulating papers of fsf writers within the University of Oregon's special collections.* It opened Thursday afternoon with a showing of *Agents of Change: A legacy of feminist research, teaching, and activism at the University of Oregon,* a documentary film by Gabriela Martinez, followed by a reception attended by so many WisCon regulars it carried, for me, a whiff of WisCon. The first symposium, "Women's Stories, Women's Lives," followed on Friday, organized roughly by decades. The second symposium, "Worlds Beyond World," took place on Saturday. On Friday evening, at the mid-point of the conference, Carol Stabile, Director of the CSWS, presented the Le Guin Feminist Science Fiction Fellowship to Canadian scholar and editor Kathryn Allan, the first scholar to receive an award from it; Ellen Scott, the Director of Women's and Gender Studies, honored Sally Miller Gearheart; Molly Gloss introduced Ursula K. Le Guin, and then Ursula read a new, unpublished story to several hundred people, after which she answered questions from two official interviewers as well as the audience.

During Ursula's reading and Q&A, the atmosphere was both electric and reverent. Feminists tend not to idolize individual women, perhaps because recognizing the dangers of the pedestal is one of the earliest lessons of Feminism 101. But this feeling so many of us have about Ursula is nothing like idealization: it goes far, far deeper than that. Her age compounds with extraordinary articulateness and conceptual clarity to tremendous effect. Many women who've lived into their 80s and 90s possess a vast understanding that shines through their eyes but only occasionally expresses itself in fragmented gems, usually pungent and often humorous. Such women tend to speak with delightful, sometimes devastating frankness as their growing indifference to social pressure results in the reticence of middle age falling to the wayside. Ursula's wisdom and frankness, though, is even more potent for having emerged from the forge of her years of thinking and writing, many of those as a conscious, questing feminist. She is our wise elder, par excellence.

The feminist sf symposium consisted of four panels and a reading by Molly Gloss. Opening the symposium, Carol Stabile observed that feminist sf provides feminists with the space to imagine alternatives. The first of the four panels drew attention to the University of Oregon's feminist sf archives, which hold the papers of Ursula K. Le Guin, Molly Gloss, Kate Wilhelm, Suzy McKee Charnas, Suzette Haden Elgin, Vonda N. McIntyre, and numerous other fsf authors. Laura Strait, a graduate student, read Ursula's correspondence with Eleanor Cameron, discussing Cameron's conflict with Roald Dahl (particularly vis-a-vis the racism in his work for children), for insight into Cameron's intentions. Three undergraduates each discussed their own interesting archival projects; although their lack of an historical or even genre context for reading authors' correspondence reminded me of the monks' understanding of twentieth-century documents in *Canticle for Leibowitz*, they did succeed in conveying a sense of the archives' riches.

The second panel, "Feminist Science Fiction as Political Theory," included Suzy McKee Charnas, myself, Vonda N. McIntyre, and Kate Wilhelm. I'd been on panels with both Vonda and Suzy before, but my awareness that all of the panelists (excepting me) had participated in the historic *Khatru* Symposium (1975) struck me with awe. For an hour and a half, led by the astute Larissa Lai, we talked about our own histories as feminists and writers, talked about fsf and its relation to feminism, both among ourselves and with the audience. Present in the audience for this and the

following panel were Liz Henry, Debbie Notkin, Jeff and Ann Smith, as well as Ursula, which made the WisCon vibe resonate throughout.

After lunch, Molly Gloss read from her wonderful Tiptree-winning *Wildlife* (2000). The third panel, "Building Feminist Worlds," moderated by WisCon regular Margaret McBride, included Molly Gloss, Andrea Hairston, Larissa Lai, and me and generated a reading list fsf works and resources (which can be found at http://csws.uoregon.edu/wp-content/docs/events/40th/40th_anniversary_recommended_scifi_list). Margaret asked each of us to name one thing we considered an absolute one-must-have feature of a feminist utopia. And then we discussed specific aspects of feminist world-building and its importance for feminists. Implicit in our discussion was the assumption that when we feminist writers build worlds in our fiction, we are contributing to the making of the feminist world we daily make and share with other feminists and our allies.

In the final panel, "Directions in Feminist Science Fiction Research," five scholars gave talks on their interesting new approaches in fsf scholarship. Moderator Grace Dillon presented a lengthy introduction, discussing Ursula's essay "My Two Native Uncles" as well as her question "what does 'frontier' mean?" and Katie King's *Networked Reenactments: Stories Transdisciplinary Knowledges Tell Us*. Joan Haran talked about what she calls the "Genes and Gender" genre and how new historiographies enable us to think about alternate futures. Alexis Lothian discussed fsf's alternative ways of knowing and ways of looking at the world. Andrea Hairston described her academic papers as "a performance of a monologue by Andrea the Professor": "I follow the desire for knowledge and then I write about it," she declared. Kathryn Allan, who studies feminist post-cyberpunk, talked about her work "Cripping the Future" and what it means to be an independent scholar working on disability in science fiction; she aims, she said, to take disability modeling away from the medical establishment and give it to the disabled.

As Kath and I drove back to Seattle, conscious that the celebration had introduced Aqueduct Press, particularly through Kath's presence in the dealers room, to many feminists, and in some cases the pleasures and possibilities of fsf, I had the thought that the feminist sf archives, the conference itself, and the emergence of new approaches to fsf scholarship are all elements of the feminist world we have been building for more than 40 years now. That world is smallish, invisible to most people, yet has disproportionate heft that makes its effects felt far and wide. I'd like to think that as long as we continue to build that shared world, we will have a chance of breaking the cycle—preserving the future from the necessity of having to reinvent the wheel of feminism once again.

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*For a more detailed description of the conference's programming, see my blog post "A Few Thoughts and Notes on the Worlds Beyond World and the Women's Stories, Women's Lives Symposia," at <http://aqueductpress.blogspot.com/2013/11/a-few-notes-and-thoughts-on-worlds.html>.

L. Timmel Duchamp is a writer as well as an editor and the founder of Aqueduct Press. Her short fiction has appeared on several Tiptree Honor Lists as well as been a finalist for the Sturgeon and Nebula Awards, and in 2010 her five-novel Marq'ssan Cycle received special recognition from the Tiptree jury.

Down Seventh Street Road

by Anne Sheldon

Grace Church Graveyard

Silver Spring, Maryland
January 12, 2005

Under the light first snow
of 2005 they lie nameless,
all seventeen beneath one obelisk.
They do it well,
privates and officers alike,
having done it so long.
From a moving car,
you can read "CONFEDERATE."
Occasional desecrations, then,
are no surprise. They were carried
here from a common grave
ten years after the skirmish at the city line.
Though they lost separate plots
when the trolley came in 1898,
they are not troubled by lush farmland
turned to pavement
or by the loud adjacent traffic
of Yankees in horseless cars.
They had a chance to shoot at Lincoln.

Mrs. Thomas Noble Wilson

Farmhouse at Seventh Street Road near Sligo
November 5, 1861

My husband gave one acre of land
for Your new church on the pike.
He was gentle to our children
and the slaves, and always spoke sweetly
of my cooking. He worked hard at the plough
and made me an oaken table
just right for all this family
and his mother's English china.
At night, when we gathered the children
for prayer, he could speak the Bible
by heart, without spectacles or candle:
Inasmuch as ye do it unto the least of these…
Why then, Lord, did you think it seemly
to snatch him up so early, barely fifty?
shot just eight miles north of the President's bedroom
and not by a lowly rebel
but a Pennsylvania scoundrel,
for the sake of two gray horses.
Or was he, my husband, of such fine stuff,
he didn't mind the loss of home
and wife and world
once he awoke in Paradise?
Did You do it just to punish me?
Such an ordinary woman.

Rev. James Battle Avirett, Chaplain

Ash Wednesday, 1862

Until the war, it all seemed wrong:
the backwards collar such a cruel metaphor.
Not that I lost God in church, like some others.
No, I always knew Him, though
we were not on intimate terms.
This formality did not disturb me.
Everywhere I looked I saw the God of Abraham,
in all the wonders and atrocities
He undertakes. Why wouldn't He desire
worship, sacrifice, consideration?

What was harder to believe in was
a spiritual dimension in my fellow Christian.
"How could God allow my horse to die?"
"I prayed to God about my wife but nothing
has improved." Well, then,
pray for riches and wake up godless
when, in the morning,
no magic has increased your pocket change.
God let the apostles die in agony, almost
every one. He leaves the Holy Land
beneath the heel of the Turk.
Is He the less for failing to absolve
the senior warden's gambling debts?
But then there was a war,
and positions to be had.

Now *these* are different sheep;
well, more like goats,
canny men who know
how bad the world can look,
nervous boys who soon will join them,
or be dead. They have foolish questions,
too, but I see a wisdom here upon the field
I haven't known before,
as if, for all these years
stained glass was fooling with my eyesight.

Elizabeth Thomas

Free Woman of Color

Vinegar Hill near Ft. Stevens,
April 1, 1862

What's the use of being free
when they come and tear my shanty down
to keep their powder dry?
Those men that dragged
my painted bedstead out on Seventh Road,
they didn't even speak no English.
Set fire to my windows and my curtains
singing German beer songs!
"Aunt Betty," they call me,
the ones I understand.
"You family to me?" I says
to that sergeant from Vermont.
"You claiming kin with me?"
That shut his pink face up.

Pulled down our church,
while they was at it, to make their *magazine*.
Must I feed this baby in the street?
Shall I go sit with slaves at Grace
where there ain't even a roof
to get my child a blessing and a name?

The President come by with his hat.
Oh, he love his big fort,
says sweet words, called me
Mrs. Thomas. "It is hard,
but you shall reap a great reward."
Don't know about no reward.
It *is* hard. Hard.

Private Henry Askew

Gambrill Mill Pond near Monocacy Junction
Saturday, July 9, 1864

Dear Sister, I have no canteen now
but folks are sharing round.
My boots are off a dead Yank,
some cheese, too, and pickled pork,
so I gave another Yank—
a New Yorker with a missing leg—my water,
just to keep the balance. Am not so sure
as some who God is fighting for.
It's funny how I love these boots,
they are too small and give me blisters.
I seem to love my blisters
and if these boots will carry me
in range of Mr. Lincoln
I will love them all the more.

Miss Sarah Ann De Sellum

Summit Hill Farm, Gaithersburg, Maryland
July 11, 1864

Confederates, on the whole,
are no less civilized than the Northern soldier
but certainly we saw the worst of them
these last twenty-four hours.
They march on Washington this noon
riding De Sellum horses,
De Sellum bacon in their bellies,
and De Sellum goods slowing down their wagons,
leaving Brother and me little but ruined fences
and two barrels of corn.

When I learned, to my dismay,
I must serve dinner to General Early,
I determined to do it right—
got out Mother's best linen
(though not her silver—that's still safe
at the bottom of the well)
and sent Tildy down cellar
to fetch the oldest port.

But later, drinking it, my poor brother
spoke up honestly (always our downfall).
Said he hoped the South
would be dragged back into the fold,
though with all her former rights.
He thought this, I suppose, disarming candor,
but— "You're an abolitionist!" cried the colonel in gray.
We are no such thing!
having four slaves ourselves.
But now they were armed
with righteous anger and ordered
the plunder of Summit Hill
as if it were a house of ill repute
in old Gomorrah.

Next day, as the rest marched south to Rockville,
two rebs came back to search the house
for money. They dared to paw
within my bedroom dresser!
But all the time I fumed and scolded
three thousand dollars
and heaven-knows-how-many bonds
were rocking gently back and forth
against my ankles.
Took me half the night
and a headache I am nursing still
to rip open six yards of muslin
and sew our only remaining treasure
into the hem
of my second-best petticoat.

Cont. on p. 6

Private Henry Askew

Near Fort Stevens, Washington, DC
Noon, July 12, 1864

Dear Sister, I write from no battle
but Endless Skirmish and misplaced
Yankee ordinance.
What damage we could do
had we their stores!
The General drank well
last night in a rich man's house
and sleeps well this morning, maybe
thinking twice about the joys
of battle. (Our lieutenant says, Early
is late, and never meant to take the Capital.
What have we been bleeding for?
The dust makes mud out of my sweat
and stoppers up my throat.)
I only wish to sleep as well myself
some night soon and wake up—
not yet in Paradise—
but looking out our cracked side window
to the Blue Ridge and the field
where even now, I wager,
the earworms are comfortable,
at peace, eating up our corn.

Lucinday Batchelder

Sacristy, Grace Church
Evening, July 12, 1864

Now they're straggling out upon the road,
not much worse for wear than when they straggled in;
but fewer by some, I cannot guess how many.
Please God, my husband spent these last days
quiet in the cellar, not fretting about honor
and trying to aid the Union cause. They have no need
of one thin farmer. Why, Mr. Lincoln's cannon
shakes these very walls, some three miles north.

Mrs. Wilson and I huddle here since,
returning Monday morning from Janie Sarrow's
childbed,
we met the rebel army: a vast marching cloud
of dust and men where New Cut Road goes down
to meet the creek. We crept through corn and came
to shelter here the back way, church mice
behind the altar, praying every prayer we know
this humble chapel will tempt no soldier.

Not much left of Sunday's wine. We drank it off
to quell the shakes and keep it from the Rebs—
then recommenced our praying. In the half-dark,
we struggled through the Common Prayer to find
"In Time of War and Tumults": *Almighty God,*
deliver us from the hands of our enemies. Abate
their pride, and assuage their malice.
As soon as they are gone, we plan to straggle home
ourselves and see what's left. I will not think
about it now. Poor skinny shoeless boys, they are,
out there…I think their pride has been abated.

James Mulloy

Battleground National Cemetery
July 27, 1864

City folk came out
to peer across the ramparts
(and between the two chimneys
which are all that stands of Osborn's house)
at all the smoke and fireworks.

We, on the far side,
between two armies, *hid*
from the smoke and fireworks
in our cellars, not even hoping for sleep
with the gunfire and crying children.
Then walked up the steps at last
to red skies and ruin.
No crops. No windows. Few dishes.
My wife in speechless tears.
You cannot tell the gray smoke from the blue.

The Confederates are gone.
Our orchard, too.
Was our President decreed
the Union dead be buried there.
No one now will drink the water
from this spring.
The new black graves
are littered with small green apples
that will never be sold to pay for beer or flour,
never be sliced or skinned for pie.

Rev. James Battle Avirett

Grace Church Rectory
December 13, 1874

Dear Lord, I am tired
but drunk with peace.
At last the mound is empty
beside the road to Washington,
at last the stinking noble bits
of southern soldier
are here in hallowed ground.
The careful vestry's satisfied,
the coffins were bought (though only six.
Not, I fear, the church's proudest moment—
couldn't the budget stretch
to eleven more pine boxes?
But sadly there was ample space
for seventeen—
so hungry to begin with,
and ten years dead.)

The graves were dug,
the service played out,
the last hymn sung,
and the poor young men
laid down for good.
At last the rector sleeps—
no screams, no terror for his wife,
no blinding memories,
but one whole night of sleep—
the first since I signed up
to be a holy hero
five weeks after Sumter
and thirteen years ago.

General Jubal Early

Cavalier Hotel, Lynchburg, Virginia
July 4, 1881

Riding south from Rockville
I observed the half-built
Episcopalian church. They had broken ground,
so a neighbor of the Blairs attested, in '57,
but the parish was as splintered
as the country, every check a stretch
to pay the rector or the lumber mill.
A certain Mr. Wilson gave the land—
an acre and a half—
and might have been elected to the vestry
had he not been shot one night
by a Union renegade
in the act of stealing a fine pair of grays.

I find I often muse
on that long-ago July,
remember fondly Mr. Blair's
exemplary wine cellar
and his rude unfinished church
where now, I hear,
seventeen of those
who fell upon the twelfth
are buried, nameless.

Last fall, I posted off a check
for one hundred Federal dollars
to the church. I make no doubt
we drank that much or more
of his Bordeaux.

Elizabeth Thomas

Fort Stevens Commemoration
November 7, 1911

It's hard to remember,
hard to want to remember
how it felt so long ago,
but all these important white men,
one of them a Reb,
want to stand here with the old black lady
in her new black dress
who spoke to the President,
and pretend they were all heroes,
all forgive and forgiven,
pretend they aren't so glad
it weren't their shanty torched,
their orchard chopped,
their children given sky for roof.
I don't mind.
The banquet was very fine.

Private Henry Askew

Grace Church Graveyard
July 12, 2014

The first church
went to the ground in 1896.
At choir practice, a candle
burned too close to windy curtains.
Twice, it's been rebuilt
and each time the parish knows less
what to make of its Confederate ghosts.
The church folk now are called
"diverse," "inclusive."
They are not entirely happy
with play-acting rebels in the old graveyard
singing "Dixie" in July.
But that first congregation
lived through hell,
yet laid down freely
fragrant wreaths of evergreen above us
on the fresh black dirt.

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Anne Sheldon is a retired children's librarian and has worked as a poet-in-the-schools and a freelance storyteller. Aqueduct Press published her poetry collection *The Bone Spindle* in 2011. Anne lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Past the World's End

Walk to the End of the World, by Suzy McKee Charnas, Ballantine Books, 1974, 214 pp.

by Nisi Shawl

[T]he conceit we editors had in mind when we initiated these recurring Grandmother Magma pieces was that an established feminist SFF writer (played this issue by me) would recommend an important older book and/or oeuvre to younger, emergent feminists interested in SFF.

Grandmother Magma

We'll begin this essay in the middle of an argument. Two writers I respect—Michael Swanwick and K. Tempest Bradford—took different sides in a controversy that concerns not just what you're reading now but all the Grandmother Magma essays *The CSZ* has published. Swanwick blogged that up-and-coming SFF authors needed to familiarize themselves with the genre's classics by reading them. Bradford responded (under an anonymous sig) that many of these classics were revolting because of their sexism, homophobia, racism, and other problematic underlying attitudes. She didn't see why reading that kind of crap should be required.

Of course I think they're both right. And somewhere in what I'm writing I plan to tell you how and why.

Now that that's set up and promised, we'll proceed to the beginning of things. In case you missed it, the conceit we editors had in mind when we initiated these recurring Grandmother Magma pieces was that an established feminist SFF writer (played this issue by me) would recommend an important older book and/or oeuvre to younger, emergent feminists interested in SFF. The recommendation is supposed to highlight a work the one offering it found influential: a book or group of books she or he considers not seminal but (to mint a new word) ovacular: an egg, a bud, a primal chamber of molten, scape-changing lava.

I write and do writing-related tasks (teaching, editing) for a living. I love my job. Whenever asked what gave me the idea that I could embark on this career, I have immediately answered that my motivation came from reading the feminist SFF writers of the 1970s. Asked for specific titles, I've always named *Walk to the End of the World* first, followed by Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*.

So of course for my Grandmother Magma essay I knew I'd write about *Walk to the End of the World*. Then I reread it. For the first time in 40 years. As you've doubtless anticipated, it was only remotely the book I remembered.

Describing *Walk to the End of the World* to friends and interviewers, I'd usually say it told the story of a woman brought up in a repressive society that had evolved from the "undisclosed location" survivors of a nuclear war: the struggling descendants of bureaucrats and secretaries living in a post-apocalyptic world. I'd say it was an account of the woman's pilgrimage through this grim society and ultimately, her escape from it.

What is it really?

It's really the story of two men.

The part of the novel that mattered to me and stuck with me for decades, the narrative of the woman named Alldera, a slave trained to run messages, lasts for 36 pages. That's less than a fifth of the book.

Walk to the End of the World is really the story of two men, lovers, journeying from one side of their land— "the Holdfast"—to the other. It's mainly through their eyes and the eyes of another man, an aging soldier who commands "rovers" (drug-addled berserkers), that Charnas shows us the agonies of women treated as subhuman breeders and laborers. Delicately, using her protagonists' peripheral vision, she depicts the horrific debasement of the Holdfast's women. Their beatings and mutilations are observed but not remarked upon—because these sorts of things are completely *unremarkable*. Their forced descent into cannibalism matters only because of the offensive stench of their corpse processing center.

Caught up in the intergenerational tensions on which their dominant culture focuses, the men's thoughts are full of their quests and the revenge they pursue. For most of the book they turn to Alldera only for her strength as a load bearer and her somewhat anomalous ability to translate their orders to other women; only briefly, near the book's conclusion, does one of them bother to inquire as to her history, motivations, expectations, and fears.

As a nineteen-year-old woman of color reading *Walk to the End of the World* I

was hugely impressed by its unflinching audacity. The society Charnas had imagined appeared to me to be the logical result of the paranoid preparations my country's rulers had made to live through the apocalypse caused by their politics. Of course women would be blamed for everything bad that had happened. Of course people of color would be driven off or slaughtered. Of course status would come to be linked to seniority. Of course homosexuality would be the idealized norm and heterosexuality this society's perversion. All that made sense.

What I couldn't understand was how Charnas had gotten away with publishing such searing truths. Not only had her novel come out from a major imprint, she'd actually been paid for it. Magic! I wanted to get away with that same trick.

I think I know now how she did it; basically, she didn't write what I read. She got that story to me slant: she laid it between the lines her characters spoke, wove it between the interstices of her descriptions, tucked it into her settings' corners. The story that she sold was not the story that she told. The story she sold was radical enough, dealing as it did— in 1974, remember— with a future culture's validation of violent sexism and its universal acceptance of gay male love (the result, not the cause, of women's oppression). Much more radical, though, was Alldera's hope.

On the novel's last page the liberated slave runs off into the wilderness, headed for a refuge she's not sure exists. It does, and Alldera finds it in the book's sequel, *Motherlines*. But at the time *Walk to the End of the World* was enthralling me with its beautiful bleakness, no sequel had been published. No literary refuge existed. There was no ostensible reason to keep going past the world's end. Alldera did, though, and I went with her.

I want you to read the book I read. Unfortunately, I'm not sure you can. I couldn't, this second time around, despite having the same copy of it right there in my hands.

Read *Walk to the End of the World* anyway. Whichever version comes to you. Read it so we can talk about it.

As L. Timmel Duchamp says in her essay "That Only a Feminist: Reflections on Women, Feminism and Science Fiction, 1818-1960," feminist science fiction may be understood as a long conversation held across time and space. Duchamp's essay is collected in *The Grand Conversation*, the first volume in Aqueduct Press's Conversation Pieces series. Charmingly, she confesses her own reluctance to read an ovacular work cited to her in numerous critiques of the field: Shelley's *Frankenstein*. She finally had to read it to talk about it. Upon doing so she realized that it was a much different, much more exciting book than others' assessments had led her to believe.

Swanwick and Bradford were both right: a first-hand experience of past classics is valuable to all of us, and to SFF's newcomers in particular. It's valuable in them to others who've been around the genre for a while, too. Also, though, past classics may not hold up under newcomers' scrutiny, and present works may set new, better standards— may eventually be deemed classics as well. We'll never know if we don't try to delve simultaneously into both our history and our present. Learning *about* the field's early tales is not at all the same as having them by heart. Hearing *about* the field's new joys is not at all the same as immersing oneself in them.

Intimate knowledge of these conversing stories is even more vital when we're concerned with *feminist* science fiction— a marginalized segment of a marginalized genre. We must communicate fluently with one another and show we take one another seriously.

Alldera gets added to *Walk to the End of the World*'s male band of adventurers at the insistence of another, older woman, a broken-down appeaser who tasks the runner with pretending to discover a legendary feminist refuge beyond the Holdfast's borders. That's the same refuge Alldera actually does set out for at the book's end. Put on the road to an unknowable future by the representative of a past she knows extremely well, she arrives at her world's end and keeps going.

Like the thrust of this essay. Like me. And, I hope, like you.

As a nineteen-year-old woman of color reading Walk to the End of the World *I was hugely impressed by its unflinching audacity.…*
What I couldn't understand was how Charnas had gotten away with publishing such searing truths.…

I think I know now how she did it; basically, she didn't write what I read. She got that story to me slant.… The story that she sold was not the story that she told.

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*.

Rip-Roaring Action and Gaudy Charm

The Waking Engine, by David Edison, Tor Books, February 2014, 400 pp., $25.99.

by Victoria Elisabeth Garcia

[E]vocative images of the built environment combine with gleefully purple dialog and an elegant sense of the grotesque to form a joyfully pulpy action romp about the clash of good and evil.

Ancient, sprawling, and so labyrinthine that it sometimes must be navigated by smell, The City Unspoken leaks myth and memory from every crevice.

The Waking Engine is a lavishly imagined and ambitious first novel. Here, evocative images of the built environment combine with gleefully purple dialog and an elegant sense of the grotesque to form a joyfully pulpy action romp about the clash of good and evil. The first of Edison's projected *Ruby Naught* series, it will have strong appeal for fans of the New Weird, as well as readers of more classical weird tales.

The novel opens as Cooper, a chunky New Yorker in a Danzig t-shirt, awakens on a strange hillock, beneath a yellow sky. Bells are tolling, and he is in extreme physical pain. Attending him are a pink-haired woman and a gray-skinned man, both of whom seem entirely unimpressed. This, he learns, is an everyday occurrence in The City Unspoken. People who have died wake up here all the time. Death, it turns out, is usually just a pause in the longer stretch of life: a comma-like pause, and not a full stop. After expiring, one simply wakes up in another place, perhaps on another world, re-embodied (usually as a full-grown adult) with memories intact, and no choice but to shrug it off and restart the business of life. Though entirely new children are conceived and born in The City Unspoken, they are the minority. The bulk of the population is made up of the formerly dead. This conceit gives Edison the chance to salt his cast of characters with a number of dead culture heroes, to interesting effect.

Ancient, sprawling, and so labyrinthine that it sometimes must be navigated by smell, The City Unspoken leaks myth and memory from every crevice. Edison's descriptions of this are pure delight:

> "…(M)onuments and mausoleums pitted and scarred with age lay tilted, stone and gilt akimbo as the growth of the city slowly devoured them.… To the west, a sculpture of a weeping woman worked entirely in silver sat buried up to her massive head in newer stonework—a garland of exhaust pipes about her neck belched bruise-purple smoke into the air from below. Not far from that, an alabaster angel blew his shofar before a ramshackle square that brimmed with black oil.… And chains, everywhere chains—thick as houses, exposed by canals, or pulled up from belowground and winched like steeples over bridges and buildings, draped across districts, erupting from the tiled floors of public squares."

Edison does a capital job of making the reader feel immersed in a milieu where magic, decay, luxury, crime, memory, and commerce have woven themselves into a bustling urban web. Indeed, the first third or so of the book sometimes feels more like travelogue than like a novel. (Even when Cooper is kidnapped and hauled before a powerful, ancient courtesan-queen, the scene has more of Louis Theroux in it than Robert E. Howard: Cooper deluges the woman with well-chosen questions, and the resulting Q&A has a rather journalistic feel.) Though this will not please all readers, some will find it uniquely satisfying. Fans of Jan Morris's extraordinary *Hav* books, in particular, will discover much to love here.

The book's slower first third also has an agreeably picaresque quality: As Cooper wanders through the city, he encounters an intriguing series of eccentrics and grotesques (a pilot who is trying, quite literally, to drown himself in beer; a wily street-kid who, unbeknownst to Cooper, is the re-embodiment of Richard Nixon; a priestess from a learned, subterranean tribe who delivers a kind of esoteric orientation lecture). Together, these characters teach Cooper (and the reader) about the workings of Edison's world in a way that has both charm and intellectual substance. The niftiness of this more than makes up for the book's ambling initial pace.

The Waking Engine is not entirely cerebral, however. Though it contains much to endear it to readers of Iain Sinclair,

Italo Calvino, and the like, at its core there beats a heart of pure, unreconstructed pulp. And even in the slower parts of the novel, there are plenty of opportunities for dialog that is elevated, cheerfully overwrought, and richly purple:

> "That's a lie!" Marvin challenged her.
>
> "Oh really?… I suppose you'll tell me that the tattoo on your lip, whatever it is, is *not* the symbol of your bondage to the Undertow, and you *aren't* a runner for a gang that worships lich-lords who swarm unseen above your burning towers? You *aren't* in thrall to undead remnants who steal souls from the dance of lives and bind them in torment? Who rape children to taste purity?"

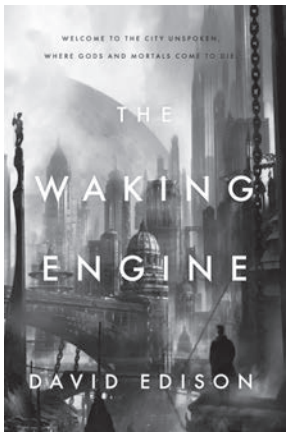
In less adept hands, this sort of thing could quickly wear thin. Edison, however, has a light touch, an understated sense of humor, and a well-trained ear for the rhythm of spoken language, and these are just the tools needed to carry this off. The book's conversational excesses bring life to the narrative, and if occasionally they're overblown enough to be funny, it seems all but certain that Edison is in on the joke.

Though Cooper is the novel's polestar, he is not the only point-of-view character. Perhaps the most engaging of the others is Purity Khloo. A noblewoman in her teens, Purity is imprisoned both metaphysically and bodily. Along with the rest of the aristocracy, she is forced to live within a rambling and palatial central structure known as the Dome. The members of the aristocracy have also been subjected to "body binding," which prevents the spirit from leaving its owner's corpse after death. (Because true and permanent death is near-impossible, the body-bound are forced to restore their original flesh to working condition after death, no matter how badly mangled or widely dispersed.) With their lives constrained in nearly every way, Purity and her young, noble peers have nothing to do but gossip, throw tea parties, and dismember one another for failing to fully comply with the dress code. But though Purity's friends appear satisfied with this golden-cage existence, Purity is not, especially after a threat from within makes itself known. Purity's pursuit of answers leads her to explore The Dome's deepest and most hallowed precincts. Edison's rendering of Purity's search is punctuated with wonderfully Mervyn Peake-ish grace notes, and Purity herself is one of the most believable, meaty characters in the book. Her sections do much to ramp up the book's energy level.

It is through the viewpoints of the antagonists, however, that the book truly gets thrown into rollicking, pulpy high gear. Extravagantly dark, lurid, choc-a-bloc with Weird Tale decadence, Edison's evil characters are as far from banal as Macau is from Toledo, Ohio. A criminal street gang, The Undertow, is willing to kidnap, rape, and torture in exchange for the thrill of being flung through the air by the lashing tails of undead demigods. Lallowë, the half-fae wife of a high-ranking nobleman, is a gorgeous young sociopath who tortures her body-bound human father to death every day, without fail. They converse as they reenact this ritual, and their calm, and quietly philosophical tone evokes De Sade, to nicely unsettling effect.

And if Lallowë is De Sade, then her mother, the Cicatrix, is Erzbet Bathory by way of Darth Vader. A fae being who once reigned over The Court of Scars, the Cicatrix has been "amending" her body with mechanical implants over time, turning herself into a great, magico-technological leviathan. Her mechanism for doing this is both brilliant and chilling: an absolutely first-rate hard fantasy invention. As the book moves toward its climax, her scenes become gloriously sinister, stunningly bizarre, and finally burst with Cronenberg-class body horror.

And once the antagonists are solidly in play, it does not take long for the book to escalate from fantastical travelogue to two-fisted adventure. Though the book maintains its vivid imagery, its smartness, and its aesthetic punch clear through to the end, we soon see these qualities put into the service of last-minute rescues, heroic sacrifices, and wisecrack-peppered swashbuckling. This lively swirl of derring-do leads to a magnificently



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Cont. on p. 13

Dangerous Women

Dangerous Women, edited by George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois, Tor Books, 784 pp., $32.50.

by Cat Rambo

I found myself, in starting to write this review, circling the title over and over again. Genre fiction has sometimes confronted, other times evaded, gender issues—how does *Dangerous Women* fit into that scheme? Is it time to talk about categories, or gender marking, or any of the other things that flicker into the mind?

Dozois goes on to talk about dangerous women in history in an intro that firmly avoids looking at any of the questions attached to the anthology's title.

The introduction by Gardner Dozois doesn't resolve much. It begins, "Genre fiction has always been divided over the question of just *how* dangerous women are." As a woman, I'm not entirely sure that's the only question genre fiction has about us, and I'm a little uneasy at the gender that this statement seems to ascribe to genre fiction. Dozois goes on to talk about dangerous women in history in an intro that firmly avoids looking at any of the questions attached to the anthology's title. This is a trifle disappointing, since it would have been interesting to hear more about the genesis of the anthology.

There are some excellent stories in this weighty volume, which ranges through genres, including fantasy, SF, historical fiction, mystery, and horror.

But introductions are not necessarily important and are often skipped by readers. I knew that I'd find better answers in the text.

And I did. As I read, many of my questions fell away and I found myself focusing on the stories. There are some excellent stories in this weighty volume, which ranges through genres, including fantasy, SF, historical fiction, mystery, and horror. One story in particular continues to stick with me—and that's a noteworthy accomplishment in a volume so dense with some of the best genre writers around. Megan Lindholm's "Neighbors" is an outstanding piece that I had to put down a couple of times because it hit so close to problems I see my own aging female relatives facing. For me "Neighbors" was the centerpiece of the book, not only because its protagonist belongs to a group woefully underrepresented in genre fiction, but because it is the product of a master wordsmith capable of playing the reader's heart like a lute.

Many of Dangerous Women*'s stories are returns to characters or worlds we've met and loved elsewhere, making this book a treasure trove for those who read widely in genre.*

Moreover, that older female protagonist isn't the only one who appears. Nancy Kress's "Second Arabesque, Very Slowly" presents an equally strong figure in Susan, though she moves through a landscape externally more dire than Lindholm's heroine. S.M. Stirling's "Pronouncing Doom" also deals with a similar older woman traveling in a post-apocalyptic landscape, although one not quite as bleak as Kress's. I'd also like to call out Diana Rowland's lovely "City Lazarus," a New Orleans noir science fiction piece that provides a perfect example of how a deft POV shift at the end of a story can cap it off; Sharon Key Penman's "A Queen in Exile," a crisp historical piece about a mother's love; and Melinda Snodgrass's "The Hands That Are Not There," which at times felt like an updated C.L. Moore story.

Many of *Dangerous Women*'s stories are returns to characters or worlds we've met and loved elsewhere, making this book a treasure trove for those who read widely in genre. The opening story, "Some Desperado" by Joe Abercrombie, returns us to Shy, one of the characters of *Red Country*, for example. In it, Abercrombie shows that he's capable of a detailed miniature as well as the beautiful tessellations of POV that comprise his novels. Jim Butcher's "Bombshells" deals not with Harry Dresden but his apprentice Molly. Sam Sykes brings us a glimpse of the shict culture in "Name the Beast." Lev Grossman takes us back to the magical college of Brakebills with "The Girl in the Mirror." Diana Gabaldon returns to the popular world of her Outlander series with "Virgins," a story that sets a young Jamie Fraser on his path. Caroline Spector's "Lies My Mother Told Me" features Michelle Pond, an ace from the world of Wild Cards, the ongoing superhero collaborative series Martin initiated.

Speaking of Martin, the most obvious example of this is, of course, one of the main reasons people will want this collection: his novella "The Princess and the Queen," which takes place in the same

world as the A Song of Ice and Fire series, but is set in a time much earlier than ASOIF's events. This is cannily saved for the last slot in the book, but is well worth the wait it may take to get to it.

I would forgive this anthology much because it included the Lindholm story. Luckily, there wasn't a great deal that seemed awry. A few stories felt a bit Dickensian in length, in the sense that sometimes there seemed to be a bit more padding about the prose than there needed to be. By contrast the Martin piece, despite its length, could have gone on even longer. Joe Lansdale's "Wrestling Jesus," while showcasing his invariably tremendous skill as a writer, doesn't seem to fit with the rest, perhaps because the dangerous woman in it doesn't seem to be all that dangerous in the end. Along the same lines, the Bloch story—while again excellent—finishes with a similar letdown.

Overall, *Dangerous Women* is a solid anthology, and I hope it inspires others like it. Each of the twenty-one stories it contains is original to the book; I suspect that many readers will pick it up for a particular author, but they will not be disappointed when they range elsewhere in the table of contents. And as for those questions as to what *Dangerous Women* has to say about gender issues, I'll leave it at this: it's not so much that the book itself makes a statement about the nature of dangerous women, but that it allows each author to say something (or not) in turn.

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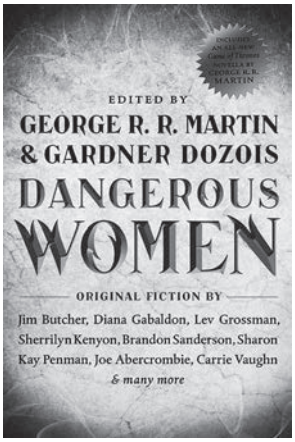

Rip-Roaring Action
(cont. from p. 11)

cinematic finale that is quite literally earth-shattering.

As with any first novel, the book does have faults.

While the setting, imagery, and genre trappings are rich as *crème brûlée,* the characters, by and large, are not. Point-of-view characters Asher and Sesstri, who eventually spearhead the fight against those who would do the city harm, are clever, compellingly exotic-looking, quick with a quip, and ultra-competent. In other words, they are bland. Cooper is a bit less so, but he is still far less memorable than the world he inhabits. Readers interested in complex emotion and nuanced depictions of the human scene may not find much to hold onto here.

But be that as it may, the book on the whole is a winner. By turns gorgeous and snappy, it is an intelligent, solid, and enjoyable read. Edison is clearly a writer to watch.

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Cat Rambo's short story "Five Ways to Fall in Love on Planet Porcelain" was a 2012 Nebula nominee. Also in 2012 her editorship of *Fantasy Magazine* earned her a World Fantasy Award nomination. She has taught a workshop for Clarion West and currently teaches writing classes on line (see http://www.kittywumpus.net).

As with any first novel, the book does have faults.… Readers interested in complex emotion and nuanced depictions of the human scene may not find much to hold onto here.… But be that as it may, the book on the whole is a winner.

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.

Intimate Space Opera

Ancillary Justice, by Ann Leckie, Orbit Books, October 2013, 416 pp., $15.

by Karen Burnham

With 2013 now firmly behind us, it's time to look back and spot some of the stand-outs of the year. One surprising title is a debut science fiction novel by Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*. It's a Space Opera that has a much more intimate focus than most, and its world-building treatment of language and culture feels like a smoother version of China Miéville's *Embassytown*. I know that we've already had the "New Space Opera" movement just 10 years ago, but it seems like a new cohort of writers is discovering Space Opera and its tropes and picking them up to play with.

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When I say intimate focus, I'm largely contrasting *Ancillary Justice* with the massively multiple third person POV novels that seem to dominate both epic fantasy and epic sf. Kevin J. Anderson's Saga of the Seven Suns series and Peter F. Hamilton's Dreaming Void trilogy spring to mind as exemplars of what I think of as "big fat sf"—both have casts of dozens of viewpoint characters, and the viewpoint switches every chapter if not more frequently. *Ancillary Justice,* in contrast, keeps a tight focus on Breq, and the only narrative switches we get are between the "present," where she is on a self-imposed quest for revenge, and the past, where we learn what she was and why she feels the need for revenge.

There are so many strengths here, many of them in the small touches.

In the present, we meet Breq on an icy and rough/rural world. She rescues a former colleague who was lying freezing in the street, a washed-up drug addict. Breq is looking for a particular weapon to use in her revenge plot, and her rescue of Seivarden slows her down a lot. Still, despite plenty of mishaps and keeping Seivarden from continuing down her spiral of self-destruction, Breq manages to progress in her personal quest.

The use of all-female pronouns made me as a reader profoundly conscious of my cultural desire to "correctly" gender people.

In the past, we discover who Breq was before: not an everyday person, but one small part of a ship-based AI entity. In this universe, there is a central empire called the Radch, expanding through conquest and cultural domination. Many of their ships are controlled by AI, and many of those use human troops who are stripped of all past life, memories, and personality (usually made up of prisoners of war), and directly controlled by the AI. The individual Breq was an ancillary of the ship Justice of Toren and was stationed as part of an occupying force on a recently conquered planet.

The combination of both big and small elements makes the world-building feel especially rich.

There are many traditional ways this could go, and Leckie conspicuously avoids several of them. She hangs a lantern on one plot she has no interest in: reclaiming Breq's "real" or human unique identity and rebelling against the AI. One character in the present timeline figures out what she was and starts agitating to recover her "original" personality; Breq shuts her down cold. This is Justice of Toren's story as much as it is Breq's alone.

The planetary occupation in the past at first goes smoothly. The population doesn't put up too much resistance to the superior Radch forces, and the military, being dominated by AI-controlled ancillaries, acts in a disciplined fashion without committing too many atrocities. When we join the story, things have been progressing smoothly for several years. The commanding lieutenant is humanistic and working to integrate the population smoothly without the need for violence. She also embodies some of the conflicts inherent in the Radch society, especially the limitations placed on a talented but not upper-class soldier in a rigidly class-stratified culture. However, all good things cannot last, and tensions between different factions on the planet draw the attention of higher-ups who demand a much more forceful response than the Lieutenant (or Justice of Toren) is comfortable with. When the narrative returns to the ship, Justice of Toren learns some critical facts about the leadership of the Radch, and the changes that are overtaking the empire over the last few centuries—and is finally destroyed, leaving Breq as the sole survivor, now trapped in a single body without access to her larger AI cohort and mind.

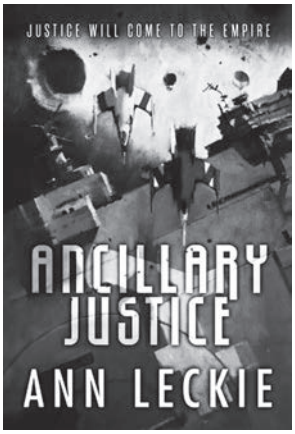
There are so many strengths here, many of them in the small touches. Breq

is part of an AI-controlled hive mind, but she in particular likes to learn music and hum it; it's a quirk that lets other characters identify her even in the homogenous horde. The Radch culture is not a simple analog of the Roman empire, as so many are in Space Operas, but has its own class-based rules, religion, hive-mind immortal leaders, and especially its own subtle clues of class status. This is particularly important when combined with the big world-building element that *everyone* has been talking about: Breq's use of exclusively female pronouns. The Radch don't use gendered pronouns (neither does Finnish, I learned last year), and also don't accentuate gender differences with clothing. This makes them appear androgynous to outsiders, and it means that as Breq travels in her present-day quest, she has trouble correctly gendering people in the languages in which that is required. On the other hand, when she and Seivarden return to a Radch-controlled space station, she is able to read subtle elements of people's dress and jewelry to learn volumes about their status and history at a glance. The combination of both big and small elements makes the world-building feel especially rich.

The use of all-female pronouns made me as a reader profoundly conscious of my cultural desire to "correctly" gender people. I would read with a weather eye out for descriptive clues that might indicate a character's "real" gender—descriptions of broad shoulders, or narrow hips, for instance. Which really drove home how culturally determined such behavior is, and serves as a nice illustration of how it doesn't need to be.

Ancillary Justice includes only a few straight-up battle scenes, and almost none of the grand scale armada vs. armada combat that Space Opera is famous for. At the climax the narrative turns away from the world-building and character-building that occupied 90% of the story and turns towards the thriller as Breq's quest comes to a head and sets new events in motion. I was a little disappointed at the turn: for one thing, I realized (as I should have known before) that the story would not be concluding with this book, and instead sets up for a sequel and probably a trilogy. Nothing wrong with that, it just didn't offer the total resolution I was hoping for. There will be plenty to cover in the next books (I suspect that there is more motivating Breq's rescue of Seivarden than she is conscious of, for instance). Also, the pacing felt like it actually slowed down for the climax, as the narration has to get Breq from point A to point B to point C in a very specific sequence, and all that detail is quite different from the broad sweeping storytelling up to that point. Also, and this is indicative of how I read sf, I was simply more interested in the world-building and the characters than in the action, so shifting the focus accentuated the elements that didn't captivate me as strongly.

In an odd way, *Ancillary Justice* put me in mind of another 2013 debut, Yoon Ha Lee's collection *Conservation of Shadows*. While Lee works in the short form exclusively (so far), she also uses Space Operatic settings with a different twist. Though her far future stories also play with conquest, colonialism, and language, her space battles draw from Korean historical warfare instead of European warfare, and she is more interested in character and culture than in on-screen violence. Both Lee and Leckie focus on characters who have survived traumatic events and then move forward with the consequences (I'm thinking especially of Lee's story "Ghostweight"). If these represent a *new* new wave of Space Opera, then I am very much looking forward to what this sub-genre has to offer in the future.



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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.

Convoluted Betrayals in a Dense and Original World

The Constant Tower, by Carole McDonnell, Wildside Press, June 2013, 456 pp., $17.99.

by Michael Ehart

McDonnell tells a tale of wandering towers, the people who live in them, and the entirely human pastimes of murder, war, and revenge. It is an amazingly original story, almost completely lacking in Western fantasy tropes. Instead we are treated to McDonnell's quite excellent world-building.

Let me start out with this: *The Constant Tower* by Carole McDonnell is rich, rewarding, and intricately and skillfully crafted. It is also dense, sometimes confusing, and often perhaps a little cleverer than it ought to be. But it has everything a sophisticated fantasy reader could ask for—ancient civilizations, an interesting and detailed social structure, a well-thought-out mythology, action, intrigue, backstabbing, unrequited young love, star-crossed friends, and weird and wonderful prose.

And what prose! The unsuspecting reader is toiling along, perhaps unsure if she should continue, and then McDonnell gives her a passage like this:

> He had risen early before the moons waned and, as usual, was thinking of his sweetheart Princess Cassia, the daughter of Chief Tsbosso, his father's great enemy. For six months, King Nahas had forbidden the marriage. Confused, longing for Cassia, Psal knew only this: he breathed easier and walked more joyfully when among the Peacock Clan, the clan to which the gentle, lovely Cassia belonged.

McDonnell tells a tale of wandering towers, the people who live in them, and the entirely human pastimes of murder, war, and revenge. It is an amazingly original story, almost completely lacking in Western fantasy tropes. Instead we are treated to McDonnell's quite excellent world-building. There is a satisfying matter-of-factness to her invented culture, a culture that is breathtaking in both ambition and scope. Her execution is marvelous: polyandry exists logically alongside "comfort women;" an outcast clan of amazons haunts the trail of the clans, looking for girls to steal. Kings and clans mean something completely different than they would in a Western European setting.

Some caveats: Much of the murder and mayhem in this book takes place offstage, especially early on. This creates a strong sense of just missing out, like being at a party where all the fun people are in another room.

Psal, the crippled son of King Nahas, is a member of the Wheel clan, dwellers in a constantly moving tower that can only be controlled by keening trees and crystals. Psal is a "studier," a scholar of keening, of pharma, and of ancient lore. While he is the king's firstborn, the royal heir is Psal's physically perfect brother. Psal loves Cassia, but her father marries her to someone else, a man who beats her "no more or less than expected." This begins a series of events reminiscent of machinations by the Borgias, with murder and mayhem aplenty.

Some caveats: Much of the murder and mayhem in this book takes place offstage, especially early on. This creates a strong sense of just missing out, like being at a party where all the fun people are in another room. It also requires the author to describe at length several moments that might have been more effectively conveyed in a more direct fashion. The big betrayal in the first few chapters, for instance, which sets the whole plot in motion, is only seen through the reaction of secondary characters.

Another minor irritation is the presence of passages like this:

> The Voca chief ignored him, walking toward Ephan. "You must be Ephan, the one they call 'Cloud'? Nahas' Little Favorite? I have heard 'Storm and Cloud always go together.'" She glanced at Lan and Netophah.

That's a lot of unfamiliar names thrown at us in a very short space, and just when the reader has gained a little confidence in her ability to keep the names straight a bunch more are introduced. Although I usually find a *dramatis personæ* a little pretentious, in this case it would have been very helpful—along with some sort of guide to the various clans, sub-clans, leaders, and general social structure.

Still, the book contains plenty of political drama, and some of the most convoluted betrayals, double-dealing, and backstabbing to be found this side of Westeros. McDonnell has a deft touch with intrigue, and her dense prose style serves her well as she takes on all *The*

Constant Tower's twistiness. The formal tone and biblical cadences and conceits of the narrative create a real sense of inevitability that strongly supports the tragic nature of much of the book. There are even a few blatantly placed foreshadowings that seem to be almost Shakespearean in both form and dramatic impact. In the hands of a less skilled craftsperson this would probably kill the narrative, but McDonnell pulls it off nicely. Another usually annoying conceit, that of a narrator telling the novel as a story to an unseen audience, here seems charming, and soon becomes less intrusive.

McDonnell's ideas are fresh and interesting, if under-explained. The concept of wandering towers controlled by keening trees and crystals is pretty cool. And the sense that everything rests atop a long-lost prior civilization, complete with the usual set pieces of mysterious ruins and the tiny bones of aborted babies, lends a sort of Lord Dunsany feel to everything that goes on in the tale's topmost layers.

Once again, some sort of guide would be a real help. There are a lot of social, political, and scientific concepts here that are largely left to the reader to puzzle out. For example, it took several chapters for me to fully grasp what the towers were and how they worked. The politics of that detail alone and all of the social ramifications took a few more chapters to work out, and I was never entirely comfortable with what I was able to understand.

Still, for the reader who persists, the rewards are great. And really, persistence is not much of a chore. McDonnell never writes a page without putting down on it something very odd and very wonderful.

Michael Ehart, a seminary graduate, writes Bronze Age sword-and-sorcery stories and novels, including *The Servant of the Manthycore*, with an introduction by Michael Moorcock. He collaborated with Nisi Shawl on "In Blood and Song," a dark fantasy based on Hausa boxing tournaments.

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Understanding Men as Extraterrestrial Experiments

The XY Conspiracy, by Lori Selke, Conversation Pieces #37, Aqueduct Press, October 2013, 124 pp., $12.

by Cynthia Ward

Women get into sex work because of current coercion or past trauma, according to one stereotype. Lori Selke's heroine Jyn becomes a stripper for the same reason many other women do: "sex work [is one] of the fields where women don't need to have finished college to make a living wage." Jyn likes the hours and several other aspects of stripping. However, her true passion is UFOs.

Lori Selke's heroine Jyn becomes a stripper for the same reason many other women do: "sex work [is one] of the fields where women don't need to have finished college to make a living wage."… However, her true passion is UFOs.

Jyn has some minor celebrity in UFO circles. But she doesn't think she merits any particular attention, so she assumes the dark-suited club customer who watches her fixedly during the book's beginning is just another job-hazard stalker. Then her roommate, familiar with Jyn's fringey enthusiasms, wonders if the creep is a Man in Black.

Who or what the Men in Black might be—government agents? aliens? coincidence?—no one knows. But Jyn gets out of San Francisco. Stripper work is portable, and her impromptu road trip will let her visit the sites of past UFO incidents, like Seattle, Yakima, Great Falls, and Roswell. She hopes to uncover new or better information about UFOs, or at least about the Men in Black. Maybe she'll discover why there's never been a sighting of a Woman in Black.

Jyn's biggest UFOlogical goal is to find firm support for her hypothesis regarding sex chromosomes.… In short, men are an extraterrestrial experiment.

Jyn's biggest UFOlogical goal is to find firm support for her hypothesis regarding sex chromosomes. She believes that the Y or "male" chromosome—which is found only in mammals, is far smaller and more fragile than the X or "female" chromosome, and is easily overpowered by environmental factors—has been introduced from outside. In short, men are an extraterrestrial experiment.

Jyn's quest reacquaints the lesbian urbanite and "punky Asian outlaw stripper chick in a dinky little foreign car" with the hazards of small towns and wide-open spaces, ranging from bad road food and hotel room break-ins to skinheads and increased exoticization by largely white and male audiences. In addition, her car is being followed. And after she trusts the owner of a Roswell UFO museum with her hypothesis about the Y that makes the guy, the museum is destroyed. Jyn finds herself on the run from a trio of Men in Black, bound for Area 51.

Does Jyn find the answers she seeks? Well, no. And, on that *basis, you might conclude* The XY Conspiracy *must be a mainstream road-trip novella, albeit one with an uncommonly high level of fascinating speculation about science, reproduction, and the existence of extraterrestrial life.*

Does Jyn find the answers she seeks? Well, no. And, on *that* basis, you might conclude *The XY Conspiracy* must be a mainstream road-trip novella, albeit one with an uncommonly high level of fascinating speculation about science, reproduction, and the existence of extraterrestrial life.

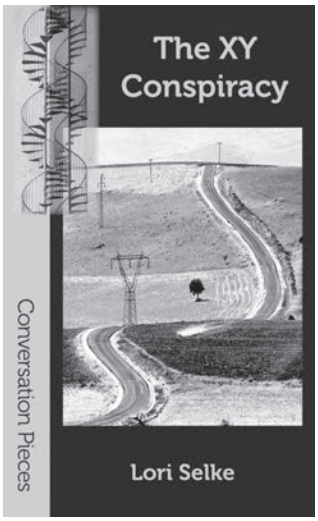
So why was this novella published by a science fiction press? The reason is something Jyn discovers near the end. It involves a reproductive strategy that is common in some "lower" earthly life forms, but has never been scientifically verified in humans. How you interpret Jyn's discovery will determine whether you view this novella as mainstream or science fiction.

Does this ambiguity undermine the novella? No. It's clear, thought-provoking, and effective. Too, *The XY Conspiracy* feels like science fiction from beginning to end (it helps that Jyn's hardly a credulous and ignorant True Believer). Whichever genre you choose for Lori Selke's first stand-alone fiction book, the narrative is vivid and solid most of the way through.

Alas, the solidity softens during the climactic stretch, when the highly intelligent protagonist's survival-savvy behavior becomes disturbingly self-threatening and her previously crystalline motives become distinctly murky. Selke has Jyn stop sharing her thoughts and start issuing motivation-masking declarations like, "I had no idea where I was going or what to do next," and "Why was I here? What was I doing? But my mind was a blank," and other "maybe I should'ves" hand-waving statements of the sort generally deployed by authors to distract attention from spotty plot logic. And given the situation our heroine ultimately ends up in (one involving grand theft auto, trespassing on a high-security

military base, gunfire, and more, and which might reasonably result in prison or death), Jyn gets off far too lightly.

Lest you think these problems derail the novella, they do not. They mark the lone weak stretch in an otherwise strong, smoothly written, and consistently absorbing narrative. Lori Selke's *The XY Conspiracy* is a very good story, very well told, and a rare respectful and sympathetic treatment of a form of women's work that is often exploited in fiction as an easy source of devalued victims for serial-killer thrillers. Not that this positive treatment is a surprise, given that Selke's a feminist author and WisCon Convention participant, whose writings range widely and skillfully in topic from science and science fiction to erotica and sexuality. Still, anticipated or not, *The XY Conspiracy*'s approach to its heroine's career is welcome relief for readers allergic to stereotypes but seeking tales of off-kilter adventure.



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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.

CORAL BLEACHING
Alicia Cole

Limestone calcerations bloom, coral
lacerations fragile. Strange, heart
blooming within the meat of the sea.
Strange, small heart blooming within
the meat of my body.

The coral fragments, ocean
acidification seeping through mural
pores. Acidification of my body,
unable to carry even the slimmest
extra weight.

When the coral sinks to a certain depth,
bleached bone remains. At the point
of passing such slender warmth,
my body pale past light; biological
factor. After

the growing matter is removed, reef,
wrenched by waves, washes up on
a shallow beach.

Alicia Cole, a writer and educator, lives in Lawrenceville, GA, with a photographer, their cat, dog, crested gecko, and two tanks of fish. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Strange Horizons, Goblin Fruit, Dark Mountain*, and *Eternal Haunted Summer*. She muses on writing at three-magpies.livejournal.co.

Princess

Kristin Kest: Contested Bodies

Kristin Kest, an illustrator for over 20 years, has worked for dozens of publishing companies, mostly book publishers in the children's science book genre, and has mostly had lots of fun at her work. While growing up, Kristin always brought home bugs, bones, shells, birds, and occasionally small, furry critters so she could study and draw them. (Her mom didn't much like the dead crow on the living room floor—but she did like the drawing.)

Lately, Kristin has made a foray into the fantasy and fiction genre; a natural next step in her evolution as an artist. Kristin sees F/SF as a logical platform for challenging social norms within the visual field of communication. Her vision for the artist is one that fits F/SF: "There must always be context for the work: who we are, what communities we live in, what connections we forge and nurture in the outside world. How we view the world greatly influences the art that we produce." In describing her outlook on art, she notes that, "an artist really needs to have a very interdisciplinary approach to life—not just literature, history, and poetry but science and mathematics are all important for similar reasons. It might seem safe and cozy enough to concentrate solely on the process of making art, but how does one do that well in an insulated art Bubble? To make the most meaningful art, I think one has to cram one's life full with a wide variety of non-art-related experiences."

After attending the 2013 WisCon, Kristin blogged about the experience from her perspective as a visual artist working as an illustrator:

> Making work to fit what one thinks the industry wants, just to make money and without any regard to one's own inner voice dilutes the message, and we end up with a resented, hollow career. Instead, we can and should make the work that best represents us and our "voice," and allow the industry to make room for it. Those interested in hiring us for the unique thing that we offer will find us. That said, those of us making work "on the margins" sometimes find a guard posted at the door: the mainstream publishing industry and its marketed demographic actively polices its aesthetic, indirectly silencing that which doesn't quite fit.
>
> So, conundrum. Where can the non-standard creative go to find community and like-minded people who support them spiritually? Where can we go to find the publishing industry heads who make things happen and can offer economic opportunities that are in alignment with our ethics and aesthetic values? Where can we find other creatives with whom to collaborate on serious imaginative projects? Look no further, WisCon is the place.
>
> …Through the seminars, creatives are encouraged and reminded to think of their privileged role as having the potential to influence culture, to create a whole new society of ethical and responsible people through stories and imagined places. The seminars suggest ways for creatives to marry their ethics to their aesthetics and to build a genre that fits them and is inclusive. Therefore, the overarching intent of the conference is not just to celebrate the beauty and strangeness—and difference—within the F/SF world, but to dream other, better possibilities into existence.
>
> (http://www.thearttank.blogspot.com/)

Kest has always worked in traditional media with brushes and oil paint, primarily, with canvas, and sealed masonite or gessoed heavy paper. Lately, however, Kest has been immersed in digital painting media and is currently working on a graphic novel. Kest has been involved as a dramaturge with the Philadelphia-based dance production company, MIRO, collaborating with them on their show, *Forbidden Creature Virgin Whore.* Some of Kest's work has been recently nominated for the Chesley and the Hugo Awards for Best SF Illustration.

(http://www.kestillustration.com/)

Featured Artist

Ma1Donna

Breaking the Surface between Equipollent Oppositions

Airless

Just Doing My Job

Ghosts Doing the Orange Dance

Haywire

Delta G

$5.00

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