

# The Cascadia Subduction Zone

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IN THIS ISSUE

## ESSAY

Revisiting *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction*  
by Sarah Lefanu

by Brit Mandelo

## POEMS

The Swooning  
by Mark Rich

The Etruscan Prince  
by Sonya Taaffe

Autonomous, Spacefaring  
&  
Grow  
by Bogi Takács

## GRANDMOTHER MAGMA

On Angela Davis's  
*An Autobiography*  
by Minister Faust

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Questionable Practices*  
by Eileen Gunn

*Fierce Family*  
edited by Bart R. Leib

*The Crane Wife*  
by Patrick Ness

*Red Sonja, Volume 1: Queen of the Plagues*  
by Gail Simone and  
Walter Geovanni

*The Stone Boatmen*  
by Sarah Tolmie

## FEATURED ARTIST

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In This Issue

## VOL. 4 No. 2 — 2014

### ESSAY

Revisiting *In the Chinks of the World Machine:  
Feminism and Science Fiction* by Sarah Lefanu  
by Brit Mandelo ⑤ 1

### POEMS

The Etruscan Prince  
by Sonya Taaffe ⑤ 5

Autonomous, Spacefaring  
&  
Grow  
by Bogi Takács ⑤ 21

The Swooning  
by Mark Rich ⑤ 22

### GRANDMOTHER MAGMA

On Angela Davis's *An Autobiography*  
by Minister Faust ⑤ 6

### BOOK REVIEWS

*Fierce Family*, edited by Bart R. Leib  
reviewed by Caren Gussoff ⑤ 8

*Questionable Practices*, by Eileen Gunn  
reviewed by Victoria Elisabeth Garcia ⑤ 10

*The Crane Wife*, by Patrick Ness  
reviewed by Gord Sellar ⑤ 12

*Red Sonja, Volume 1: Queen of the Plagues*, by Gail Simone and Walter Geovanni  
reviewed by Cynthia Ward ⑤ 14

*The Stone Boatmen*, by Sarah Tolmie  
reviewed by Thomas Foster ⑤ 17

### FEATURED ARTIST

Dale McBride ⑤ 24

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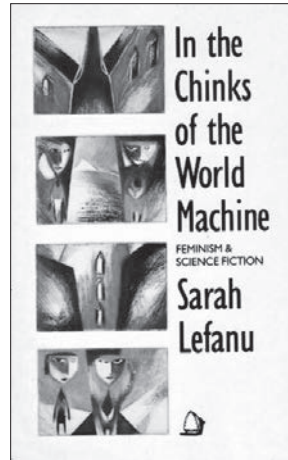


## Revisiting *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* by Sarah Lefanu

by Brit Mandelo

“[O]ne of the aims of this book [is] to chart that extraordinary relationship between feminism and science fiction that flowered in the 1970s and that continues to the present day. I would like to give the lie to a version of events that belittles the achievements of women *and our politics* in the 1970s, that seeks to dismiss them as faddish and passé. I hope to show that science fiction is one of those areas—and there are others of course—where the idea of feminism as a thing of the past can be resisted with spirit, as can the insidious notion of ‘post-feminism’”(7). So Sarah Lefanu introduces the project of *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction*—grounded in the then-present, considering the past. And it is with a certain ironic awareness that I’d like to revisit this text as a part of the self-same past it initially sought to document, grounded as I am in our present and reading it through the history of interactions between feminism and science fiction.

Initially published in 1988, Lefanu’s *In the Chinks of the World Machine* is—though I hesitate to put too fine a point on it—older than I am. Written and published in the politically reactionary Thatcher-Reagan era, this is a book firmly grounded in its time and reflective of its contemporary critical and literary environment; reading it for the first time nearly twenty-six years later was as much an exercise in historicizing the text, for me, as the work Lefanu was doing in considering fiction from (primarily) the ’60s and ’70s. Since the publication of this book, others have undertaken the task of providing a more complete study of feminism(s) and science fiction—Helen Merrick’s *The Secret Feminist Cabal* is a dense and well-researched project that goes into great contextual and historical detail, for example—but, all the same, it was intriguing to revisit Lefanu’s survey of the productive upheav-



*Written and published in the politically reactionary Thatcher-Reagan era, this is a book firmly grounded in its time and reflective of its contemporary critical and literary environment...*

heaval that occurred when the “what if?” literature of science fiction encountered the theory and praxis of second-wave feminism. Furthermore, judging by the tendentious conversations occurring today about the role of social justice and intersectional politics in speculative fiction, there remains a potential utility in Lefanu’s discussion of the not-too-distant past in the genre—in particular for folks like myself who weren’t around at the time.

The first half of the book consists of ten brief survey-like chapters on topics ranging from the Gothic origins of science fiction to “The Vicissitudes of Love” in the genre, while the second is made up of four longer-form essays examining the works of various relevant writers (James Tiptree Jr., Ursula K. Le Guin, Suzy McKee Charnas, and Joanna Russ). This structure is, I think, still useful and informative, especially for a reader who might be unfamiliar with some of the earlier concerns of feminism, genre, and criticism. For a new generation of interested writers and readers, this contextualized overview of the terms, concerns, and climate of the feminist turn in science fiction offers a view into the way that these issues were being discussed a quarter-century ago, while at the same time serving the initial intention of the

*...it was intriguing to revisit Lefanu’s survey of the productive upheaval that occurred when the “what if?” literature of science fiction encountered the theory and praxis of second-wave feminism.*

*Cont. on p. 2*



## Revisiting *In the Chinks of the World Machine*

(Cont. from p. 1)

*The ten chapters of the first section are...primarily surveys....These run-downs are a great taster for more complex ideas about the genre and its criticism.*

...

*The second half offers more in the way of Lefanu's own criticism as she explores her four chosen authors*

book itself: to make an argument for the presence and importance of feminist intervention in SF.

The ten chapters of the first section are, as previously noted, primarily surveys. Lefanu is not making in-depth arguments, but offering brief explanations and contexts for a series of inter-related issues like the origin of science fiction in the Gothic tradition (and therefore its potentially subversive, woman-oriented roots) and the role that utopia/dystopia has played in feminist genre writing. These run-downs are a great taster for more complex ideas about the genre and its criticism; it is worth noting that, in several chapters, Lefanu points the reader to related and more dedicated essays on the given topics—primarily, in fact, essays written by Joanna Russ. This perhaps also points to the primary utility I see for this text, particularly its first half, in revisiting it: as an introduction to these concepts and their significance, and a roadmap for where to go to find out more.

The second half offers more in the way of Lefanu's own criticism as she explores her four chosen authors: three as "good" examples and one (Le Guin) as a "bad" example. The essay on Le Guin is, for me, the most interesting of the bunch. Lefanu makes several strong points about the fact that, while Le Guin's science fiction novels are accessible in their traditionally novelistic sensibilities and while they do "deal with" gender, they are difficult to call feminist. *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* both feature masculinity as their primary locus of selfhood; women are either absent or do not fare well in the terms of their worlds and the text. As Lefanu concludes, Le Guin "speak[s] with the voice of authority—although it is a voice that is at once self-critical and encouraging to others—rather than against it" (146). In this argument, Lefanu's own sense of what makes "feminist" science fiction bears a great deal of weight—but, whether or not the reader agrees with

her specific criteria, the analyses of Le Guin's novels in terms of their women is still quite sharp.

I was also pleased that—though many of the examples Lefanu uses are going to be familiar to readers at all conversant with "feminist SF" (*Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy, essays and fiction by Joanna Russ, etc.)—there were also writers under discussion here whom I had never heard of before. For example, in the chapter "Travelling Heroism," Lefanu discusses the work of Josephine Saxton—a writer whose fiction I've never encountered, but who sounds fascinating. Lefanu calls her work "difficult to classify" (more on this idea of classification in a moment); she "produces works of political metaphor" that explore issues of gender, self, and internality" (31). And, more than that, they sound delightfully *weird*. The work of Tanith Lee (also a British author) comes up frequently as well; while I would say that US critics do occasionally discuss Lee, Lefanu puts a much finer point on her contributions to feminist SF. I would, having read these contexts and arguments about Tanith Lee's work, be interested in seeing an essay that revisits her fiction not simply in terms of its particular second-wave feminism but in terms of her "third wave" work, queer work, and work that presses beyond the boundaries of what Lefanu is primarily discussing here.

However, that notion of the difference between second-wave feminism and contemporary intersectional feminism also brings me to another note—and perhaps a different tone, for a bit. Though I do think that this is a useful and informative text, reading *In the Chinks of the World Machine* was an occasionally uncomfortable experience. It is, in many ways, a text of its time—a useful, illustrative view of the state of the field and research on feminist SF during the late '80s but also a text of the late '80s. The text pervasively reflects assumptions that were often commonplace throughout the otherwise variously constituted and sometimes fractious feminisms of the period: gender remains rather binary in discussion and practice, there is the

*Though I do think that this is a useful and informative text, reading In the Chinks of the World Machine was an occasionally uncomfortable experience. It is, in many ways, a text of its time—a useful, illustrative view of the state of the field and research on feminist SF during the late '80s but also a text of the late '80s.*



occasional mention of race or sexuality but they are primarily left unremarked, etc. While challenging misogynist, reductive gender essentialism is certainly a concern of Lefanu's, more subtle gender essentialism also crops up here in forms that are recognizable and discomfiting to me *now*, but were not quite so at the time. Perhaps the easiest way to explain this is that the feminism of *In the Chinks of the World Machine* is about women specifically constituted—Lefanu herself mentions this conflict—as *women* rather than as “images” of women. There is not, seemingly, a role for queer feminists who are not women (Samuel Delany's place in Russ's essay on feminist utopias is examined, here, with some suspicion). As a corollary, there is also a sense that pervades this text of the definition of “woman” being somewhat narrow. These are, of course, criticisms that could be leveled at nearly any text before the last decade of the twentieth century, including feminist texts. Initial debates on the structure and functions of gender were often primarily concerned with staking out the constructed nature of masculine/feminine social roles; challenges were also being made against the primacy of narratives about women's functional inferiority and limited access to the public sphere—in short, the debate was often about defending women's basic autonomy. In these arguments, the definition of “woman” went relatively unchallenged; in some cases, this resulted in divisions based on race and class, as well as the frequent exclusions from the conversation of, for example, transgender women. This is not unique to Lefanu's work, or to the work she is discussing, but rather a reflection of the struggles and blind-spots of a specific moment in time.

The examination Lefanu makes of Sally Gearheart's *Wanderground* is a good example of these subtle undertones of what the construction of a sense of female identity might actually mean as it is used in this context. She discusses, with praise and comfort, aspects of the book that make me profoundly *uncomfortable*, such as the “notion of an essential femaleness” in the non-confrontational

modes of communication, living, and loving the women of the novel share. While this is a discussion of utopias—and perhaps this is someone's utopia, certainly—it is difficult for me to read an uncritical analysis of a biologically based separatist novel that emphasizes women's “natural” modes of being as “gentle, loving, caring [and] noninvasive” (68). In her conclusion, Lefanu notes that this book “represents an imaginative recreation of an unthreatening childhood world” that is “dream-like” and “deliberately “feminine”—but that “it is transformed [...] from feminine into feminist; it is illustrative, discursive, non-developmental” (69). I won't disagree that it's a feminist novel—it is so directly and clearly informed by a particular thread of feminism!—but I do, from a current position, want more discussion about the potential problems of such a discursive construction of “natural” womanhood.

On a related note, something else that struck me throughout this text is the regularity with which Lefanu categorizes her subjects, delineating their boundaries and points of inclusion/exclusion as if with mathematical precision. In particular, the dance between defining science fiction as related to and separate from fantasy is one that has grown stale in the intervening years; it no longer seems particularly necessary to pick and negotiate where in the publishers' categories a book or author might fit. Interestingly, though Lefanu often gestures toward the fact that genre is arbitrary and says she'd rather discuss what science fiction *allows* than what it *is* (21), she also comes back around to the exemplary and particular specialness of *only* science fiction as well. In the discussion of Saxton, for example, Lefanu says that her work “is difficult to classify and while in an ideal world with a free interplay between the writer and reader classification should not be necessary, the point is that publishers, and others, do like it. The fact that it is SF editors, of books and magazines, who have consistently shown interest in Saxton's work is not without significance” (31) — this, after quoting at length from Saxton herself about her discomfort with being

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## Revisiting *In the Chinks of the World Machine*

(Cont. from p. 3)

*Though I remain uneasy with Lefanu's tendency toward classification and categorization, I also cannot deny that the act of defining boundaries (this is, this is not) produces provocative and engaging conversations about, for example, those distinctions we might make between "science fiction by women" and "feminist science fiction."*

classed as specifically SFnal. It is as if, at points, Lefanu seeks to avoid classification but can't help doing it anyway when she then goes on to introduce the novels and short stories about which she writes. The occasional strain this produces in the theoretical framing of the arguments is difficult not to notice, at least for me.

The most obvious of these classifications, though, is the one Lefanu makes between work she considers feminist and work that is merely about or by women. This is a separation beyond simply "this text is misogynist/this one isn't," she is instead seeking to draw lines regarding what the texts *do*, what their thematic freight might be, and to classify them accordingly. Though I remain uneasy with Lefanu's tendency toward classification and categorization, I also cannot deny that the act of defining boundaries (this *is*, this *is not*) produces provocative and engaging conversations about, for example, those distinctions we might make between "science fiction by women" and "feminist science fiction." This is, perhaps, the part of Lefanu's argument that remains the most debatable and salient to current criticism: is representation alone an act of political subversion? If it is not, what is? When does the scale tip from merely "aware of political issues" to "conversant on those issues?"

Lefanu's distinction seems to be, in her short chapters on the matter at the close of section one, that what she calls "women's science fiction" remains subject to the duality of authority/sentiment (male/female) as guiding textual principles—either the writer adopts the authority of the masculine, or slips entirely into the sentiment of the feminine. Regardless, the status quo remains unchanged: though using these forms intentionally may "challenge" the "ideology," "it does not interrogate its [the binary system's] construction" (93). However, she argues that *feminist* science fiction is specific in its acts of subversion; these writers "speak neither from a position of (transformed) authority nor from a position

of (newly validated) sentiment but... deconstruct notions of essentialism from a relativistic position" (94). Of course, there seems to be an inherent instability in this construction of women's versus feminist science fiction writing—namely, that in refusing "traditional" narrative forms as modes of subversion, Lefanu has constructed another binary.<sup>1</sup> It is not, therefore, the *question* that I feel an antipathy towards—the question of what makes fiction political, or subversive, is still relevant—but Lefanu's answers incite a certain discomfort in me. In refusing what she sees to be one form of essentialism, it rather appears that another is being set in its place. Though encouraging relativism, I am not sure the text always succeeds in achieving it.

And yet, how would I answer the question: if put to the task, how would I define the lines between feminist speculative fiction and, well, everything else? I suspect that the first part of my answer would be, "it's complicated."

I feel a level of resistance to the idea that we can so simply and clearly delineate, in defined and always-applicable terms, what is relevant to the conversation on feminist theory and praxis in our genre—or even what we consider feminist theory and praxis. Helen Merrick's *The Secret Feminist Cabal* carries the subtitle "A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms" for a reason; this is, I think, an important addition to or continuation of the conversation Lefanu begins in her book, and the direction that might be most fruitful to take in future work on the subject. However, we're certainly talking about *something* when we talk about feminisms in speculative fiction, and the *I know it when I see it* approach is perhaps not as useful as one might hope in examining im-

*...we're certainly talking about something when we talk about feminisms in speculative fiction, and the I know it when I see it approach is perhaps not as useful as one might hope in examining important contributions and issues in the field.*

1 This is, perhaps, familiar territory: Lefanu often quotes Joanna Russ, in particular mentioning her classifications of science fiction with "images of women" in it—including the famous "galactic suburbia" bit. In this case, it is worth noting that Russ's own later work, particularly in *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, would seem to contradict her initial refusal of that postwar "ladies' magazine fiction."



portant contributions and issues in the field. In the end, classification has its relevance. Lefanu is right to ask the question about what, for example, makes Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* a good book but not a feminist book. Her answers, I remain ambivalent on. Perhaps in our own discussions, as critics and writers and readers of speculative fiction, it would benefit us to seriously consider these past conversations and preoccupations—with classification, with gender, with politics—and their contributions as well as their problems, their contexts, and their methods. At the very least, it helps to know where we've been and how we got where we are if we want to figure out where we might be going next. Sarah Lefanu's *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* still has plenty to offer on that score.

Lefanu, Sarah. *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction*. London: The Women's Press, 1988.

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Brit Mandelo is senior editor for *Strange Horizons* and author of *Beyond Binary: Genderqueer and Sexually Fluid Speculative Fiction* and *We Wuz Pushed: On Joanna Russ and Radical Truth-telling*. She lives in Louisville, Kentucky.

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## The Etruscan Prince

by Sonya Taaffe

Not like those couples  
enfolding eternity  
in their warm-carved arms,  
we lie in reserve,  
touching only the close-cut rock,  
the mossy bronze of a jewel-box  
white-faced with cinders,  
the pins fallen from my mantle  
when it rotted faster than my bones.  
Polish the mirror, our shades swim in it  
like Teiresias,  
the spear-carrier of Tarchna  
with my lover's ashes at my side.  
Or something other, haunting the vices of Rome—  
wine splashed to the floor,  
blood on a woman's hem.  
No more than you know my name  
will you know what I carried  
into the dark with me, gift or insignia.  
We hold ourselves in fragments, knowing however  
you fit us together, you cannot see us whole.

---

Sonya Taaffe's short stories and poems have appeared in numerous publications including *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Alchemy of Stars: Rhysling Award Winners Showcase*, and *Singing Innocence and Experience*. She lives in Massachusetts.



## ⚙ On Angela Davis's *An Autobiography*

*Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, by Angela Y. Davis, Random House, 1974

by Minister Faust

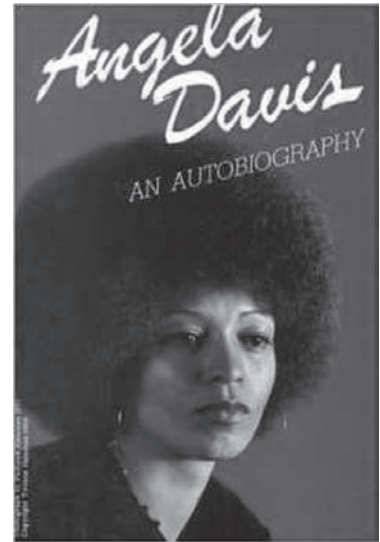
To millions, the author-intellectual Davis is a living hero from an era in which too many firebrands were extinguished all-too-violently.

To the nitwits of the click-and-quip mediocracy, the woman is summed up by her iconic hairstyle, a hairstyle once called “a natural” and then an “Afro” before the concept-clippers truncated the consciousness behind the cut into the slangism “fro.”

But Dr. Angela Yvonne Davis, former fugitive, former member of the Communist Party, former potential denizen of death row, and very current human rights activist, is far more than a copywriter's cute coiffure cliché. To millions, the author-intellectual Davis is a living hero from an era in which too many firebrands were extinguished all-too-violently.

Born 1944 in Birmingham, Alabama, young Davis took her parents' social justice activism to her marrow, joining the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as a teenager. A brilliant young student, she travelled at age 16 to Germany where she studied at the Frankfurt School under the guidance of German philosopher and critical theorist Theodor Adorno. While studying at the Sorbonne in 1963, Davis received word that two of her friends had been murdered. Rosamond Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, whom Davis described as being like sisters to her, were among four African American girls butchered by White terrorists in the Birmingham church bombing.

Upon her return to the US, Davis graduated with her BA *magna cum laude*. After earning her Master's Degree, Davis began teaching in California's public university system, where she earned the wrath of then-governor Ronald Reagan for her association with the revolutionary Black Panther Party (BPP) and her membership in the Communist Party; Reagan's government attempted to have her fired. But that case of political repression disguised as employment harassment would soon prove to be the least of her problems.



Davis was linked romantically to George Jackson, a Gramscian “organic intellectual,” author of *Soledad Brother*, hard-time prisoner and “Field Marshall” for the BPP. In 1970, Jonathan, Jackson's younger brother, attempted to free his brother from a Marin County courthouse; his bungled operation led to his own death, the deaths of three other African Americans, and a White judge. Accused of having supplied weapons to her paramour's brother, Davis herself became a fugitive, and at age 26 became only the third woman in US history to be placed on the FBI's Most Wanted List.

On the run for weeks, living in and out of safe houses until she was finally caught and imprisoned to await trial, Davis conducted a firsthand analysis of the interior of what she would later call the US “prison-industrial complex.” A black star on Richard Nixon's and Ronald Reagan's enemy list, Davis faced execution by toxic gas; having become an international *cause célèbre*, Davis eventually won acquittal and her own freedom, but refused to walk away from the horrors she'd seen behind bars for the last (and nearly the final) sixteen months of her life. As arguably the lead advocate for prisoner rights in the United States, Davis entered electoral politics as the US Communist Party's vice presidential candidate in 1980 and 1984, and published books on a variety of top-





ics, including an autobiography; *Women, Race & Class*; *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*; and the recent *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Prisons, Torture, and Empire*. She's a professor now retired from the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, part of the very state system Reagan swore would never employ her again. She continues to lecture widely and is a mainstay on the modern enemies-lists of American arch-conservatives.

The unembellished title of Davis's *An Autobiography* might seem to telegraph to readers that the work beneath the cover is a dry recitation of historical facts. Some readers might even assume that Davis, as a professor, would have penned an impenetrable tome of high academese or theoretical gobbledegook. Instead the book, which Davis wrote when she was only 28, is a finely-wrought work of thoughtful prose and a gripping page-turner—part hard-left political thriller, part African American coming-of-consciousness tale of personal, revolutionary praxis. Via flashbacks, Davis takes us through all her foundational experiences inside and outside the USA, including her brief work with the BPP and her longer devotion to the Communist Party.

But it's the framing narrative of being on the run, leaping from one hidden location to the next, and finally being captured and incarcerated, that makes this book unforgettable. It's not that we haven't read prison accounts before, but this is the rare story of an even rarer African American female university professor and militant, in a (alternate universe's) storybook romance with a dashing (and ultimately murdered) fellow writer, intellectual, and militant, whose fall from "grace" puts her inside the bowels of the racist, violent American prison system. There are Davis's accounts of surviving the miseries and dangers of imprisonment by finding solidarity with other women prisoners, and of the growing "Free Angela" movement that sweeps up thousands of ordinary folk and even Aretha Franklin as a

possible funder of her defense. And in the prisons, we meet women whose lives were entirely different from that of Davis, but could have been hers, had Davis's stars aligned in another constellation. For lack of education, or familial ambition, or innate or cultivated intellect, or myriad unknown and unknowable cosmic caprices, these women had fallen into the modern plantation system in the old fashioned way: by stealing small sums instead of small countries, by committing personal acts of violence instead of waging wars, by selling their own sexual services instead of running industries doing the same. The women Davis befriends in the dungeon are microcosmic ciphers of all the oppressed women in the ghettos and barrios of her country and in *latifundias* and colonies around the hemisphere and the world. And it's to those literally, rather than metaphorically, jailed women that Davis ultimately devotes much of the rest of her life.

My favorite section of the book, which has remained with me since the time I first read it around twenty-five years ago, is a passage that speaks, eloquently and via pointed imagery, of privilege and poetical self-seduction, and the grinding work of making a better world or merely a better evening. Davis describes a pre-prison solidarity journey to early-revolutionary Cuba during that country's epic struggle to raise ten million tons of sugar for export. Like an agricultural version of the soldiers who picked up rifles to aid anarchist Spain against the fascist onslaught, Davis and thousands of others went to Cuba to pick up machetes in the struggle for economic self-determination. She says the following of her experience of the exhausting work:

One day I remarked to a Cuban how I admired his skill in cutting cane—it was almost like an art, the way he did it. He thanked me for the compliment but quickly added that his skill...needed to become obsolete. Cane-cutting was inhuman toil, he said. Before the revolution thousands had had to depend for their survival on

*...the book, which Davis wrote when she was only 28, is a finely-wrought work of thoughtful prose and a gripping page-turner—part hard-left political thriller, part African American coming-of-consciousness tale of personal, revolutionary praxis.*

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Cont. on p. 9



## 🌀 A QUILTBAG, in More than One Sense

*Fierce Family*, edited by Bart R. Leib, Crossed Genre Publications, 2014, 168 pp., \$11.95.

reviewed by Caren Gussoff

*Leib did an excellent job of representing a wide continuum of families and of subgenres. Stories run the gamut from fantasy to hard sci-fi, and there is a nice variation in the arrangements of each family unit.*

*Fierce Family, with its theme of QUILTBAG families—healthy families—in speculative fiction, is a prime example of Crossed Genre’s mission. It’s also an example of the press’s inconsistent quality.*

As a writer—and reader—I immediately give any anthology including stories that speak to and about the experiences of diverse peoples and that portrays underrepresented characters in speculative fiction points simply for existing. That gave *Fierce Family* a leg up in my esteem, in spite of its slightly low-rent looking cover treatment (judging books by cover: I cop to doing this, and while the cover image is quite nice, the typography and layout scream first time self-publisher to me).

The anthology is not, of course, self-published at all—Crossed Genre Press’s parent magazine has been around for just about five years, and the press has published, by the time of this review, at least eight book-length works. Crossed Genre has established, during this time, much goodwill for its inclusive, if not for its uneven, tastes, and for its dedication to finding and publishing stories starring protagonists of color, who are queer (in sexuality, identity, and/or gender), or are otherwise ignored in genre fiction. And *Fierce Family*, with its theme of QUILTBAG families—healthy families—in speculative fiction, is a prime example of Crossed Genre’s mission. It’s also an example of the press’s inconsistent quality.

None of the stories are bad. Some just feel rough, unfinished...like incomplete thoughts. The opening story, “Dinkley’s Ice Cream,” by Effie Seiberg, sets up a fine, fantastic premise—ice cream that literally makes you relive childhood memories—but cuts short the story with a big change that the main character has not yet earned. It’s a disappointment, since the character herself, a strong, single mother of a rambunctious and well-drawn daughter, could truly deserve the happy ending—we just never get a chance to engage long enough to watch her grow.

Stephanie Lai’s “Form B: For Circumstances Not Covered in Previous Sections,” is another piece that feels

unfortunately unfinished. Again, the premise is an excellent one, following an insurance adjuster processing claims in post-apocalyptic Australia, and how personal tragedy moves her to connect with the world’s suffering in more than an abstract, professional way. But the pace is rushed, and much is told rather than shown in the second half, and there are, seemingly, careless contradictions left in.

I’m struck, in some of the other stories, by how one of the two critical elements—non-nuclear/queer/alternatively-identified families, and speculative elements—feel tacked on, as if the characters could be from any sort of family, or the actions did not need to take place in the future/in space/using magic. Rather than being a true intersection of spec and healthy, happy, fierce families, it feels like existing stories were jury-rigged to fit the theme.

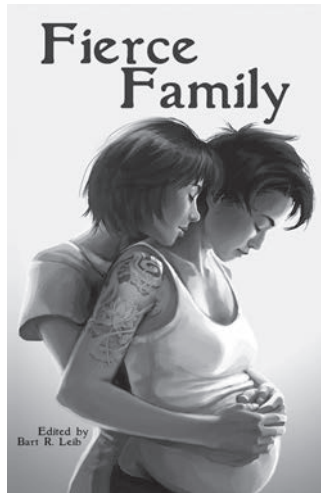
In A.C. Buchanan’s “Growth,” for example, on the earthlike planet Glar, a human colony’s flawed assumptions about the nature of their new home unfold through the eyes of a teenager. The teen is smart, observant, and, we are told, identifies as both male and female. Their gender identity is also supported by their lesbian moms. However, the gender queerness and family of two mothers is, at no point, central to the plot of the story, and does not affect the character’s reactions, knowledge, or dealing with the titular “growths” that gestate inside them. I can make a longwinded point, after reading, that there is statement going on by placing a pregnancy inside a character who identifies as both male and female—but that is the academic in me. There’s no indication that this was done on purpose.

There are standouts, of course: Rick Silva’s “The Home Study,” with its clever “inter-dimensional” adoption, portrays the nontraditional family both as character and as metaphor; “Mission: Extraction,” by Mina MacLeod, is a tight little space opera with a bad-ass QUILT-



BAG family behind the controls; and “Stormrider,” by Layla Lawlor, which suffers from the tacked-on family element syndrome, but which is so exciting, so beautifully written, and so engaging, it’s easily my personal favorite, and I am willing to blow off the tenuous-at-best need for the main character to be in love with another man.

As an editor, Leib did an excellent job of representing a wide continuum of families and of subgenres. Stories run the gamut from fantasy to hard sci-fi, and there is a nice variation in the arrangements of each family unit. Leib also carefully arranged the stories in the volume, ensuring that the anthology itself maintained a pace of its own, and that types of story were distributed evenly throughout. *Fierce Family* failed to deliver on its promise of consistently fierce families in speculative worlds. But while the uneven quality of the anthology dragged it down, the integrity of its vision buoyed it up.



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Caren Gussoff writes both literary and speculative novels and short stories. She lives in Seattle.

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### On Angela Davis’s *An Autobiography* (Cont. from p. 7)

working like animals during the cane season. Many of them would end up having to cut off a finger with the machete for a little insurance money to make ends meet a little while longer.

The job of cutting cane had become qualitatively different since the revolution. No one was a cane-cutter *by trade* any longer; during the cane season everyone pitched in. Also profits for others were not being squeezed from their sweat and toil. They knew that the returns from sugar sales abroad would be used to raise the standards of the Cuban people as a whole—new schools would be built, more hospitals constructed; child care centers would multiply, better housing would be available to those who had the greatest need.

Even so, this Cuban said, the business of cutting cane was work not

fit for human beings; it made you old before your time. He continued to do it because he knew that he was working for the day when his sons and their children would not have to work under the sweltering sun. Mechanization of the entire industry was on the agenda, but the rapidity with which it could be put into operation depended on the sacrifices they were all willing to make.

In this way he subtly criticized me for having romanticized something which was really nothing more than terribly hard work. It was then that I began to realize the true meaning of underdevelopment: it is nothing to be utopianized. Romanticizing the plight of oppressed people is dangerous and misleading.

My favorite section of the book, which has remained with me since the time I first read it around twenty-five years ago, is a passage that speaks, eloquently and via pointed imagery, of privilege and poetical self-seduction, and the grinding work of making a better world or merely a better evening.

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Minister Faust (also known as Malcolm Azania) is a Canadian teacher, writer, community activist, radio host, and political aspirant. He lives in Edmonton, Alberta.





## A Considered Kind of Gonzo

*Questionable Practices*, by Eileen Gunn, Small Beer Press, March 2014, 286 pp., \$16.00.

reviewed by Victoria Elisabeth Garcia

*An impressively varied olio that includes decadent fantasy, rip-roaring aviation adventure, SFnal slice-of-life metafiction, sly satire, and even a bit of poetry.*

*Though not every piece will please every reader, the best works positively crackle with verve and intelligence. Most serious readers will find something to fall in love with here.*

*The book also contains two gorgeous elven fantasy stories, written in collaboration with Michael Swanwick.*

*Questionable Practices* is an intriguing new collection from Nebula and Sense of Gender award-winner Eileen Gunn. An impressively varied olio that includes decadent fantasy, rip-roaring aviation adventure, SFnal slice-of-life metafiction, sly satire, and even a bit of poetry, its contents are united by the vividness of the authorial voice; the sharpness of their social, emotional, and technological insight; the limberness of their structures; and the finesse with which Gunn is able to balance narrative drive and expressionistic flow.

This collection contains twelve reprinted pieces from the years 2006 through 2012, as well as two original stories (“Chop Wood, Carry Water” and “Phantom Pain”). Though not every piece will please every reader, the best works positively crackle with verve and intelligence. Most serious readers will find something to fall in love with here.

In her earlier work, Gunn often wrote about the ways human beings and digital technology influence one another. The new collection includes further exploration of this theme. “Hive Mind Man,” written in collaboration with Rudy Rucker, wittily captures the informational and commercial *horror vacui* of the internet, as well as the magical thinking, the flights of narcissism, and the gold-rush mentality of the e-business world that supports and exploits it. Along the way, the story pillories the absurdity and the cheerful sociopathy of the corporate world with precision and ease, and manages to feel at once both breezy and harrowing. While this is achievement enough, the story’s true magic lies in the effortless way that in the end, Gunn and Rucker distill from these blackly humorous and techno-dystopian precursors a final note that is sweet, genuine, loving, and warmly utopian. It’s a wonderful piece of work.

Several of the stories in this collection demonstrate similarly graceful gymnas-

tic feats. “Up the Fire Road,” a wilderness survival story with Sasquatch, grapples with illusions and self-deceptions involved in sex and love, the nature of families, and the power of daytime television. Here, a couple on a cross-country ski trip become lost in the woods and are given shelter by a kindly but grizzled hermit, who turns out to be somehow more than human. As the couple’s days in the woods stretch into months, each forms a unique, romantic bond with their wooly benefactor. Here, the ebb and flow of intimacy between flawed but vivid human beings is depicted exceptionally well. The depiction of the Sasquatch as caring, benevolent, but unmistakably otherworldly, is also very well done.

Eventually, the couple’s time in the Sasquatch’s world comes to an end. In a less inventive writer’s hands, the story, most likely, would also come to an end here—but Gunn pushes the narrative further, and shows us the encounter’s consequences back in the workaday, urban world. The story finishes in a bright swirl of love, tawdriness, renewal, and comedy. An emotionally honest story, built on a chassis of strong SFnal thinking, and powered by an engine that runs on high-octane gonzo,<sup>1</sup> and it’s an absolute delight, and not to be missed.

Not all of Gunn’s stories rely on humor, however. In “Chop Wood, Carry Water,” we follow the inner life a golem who hauls tombstones for a rabbi in 16th century Prague. Here, the tone is as cool and solid as the clay from which the golem was shaped, and the reader is pulled in, not by conventional drama or genre pyrotechnics, but by the starkly alien quality of the golem’s attempts to understand himself, the human world, and the nature of his own Jewishness, or lack thereof.

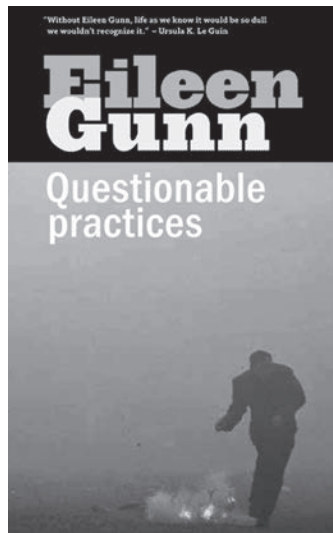
The book also contains two gorgeous elven fantasy stories, written in collaboration with Michael Swanwick. In the post-apocalyptic coming-of-age story “Armies



of Elfland,” the fae folk are a nigh-invincible invading hoard, driven by a mixture of fury, caprice, and ironclad tradition. Deeply alien, down to their forms of humor and their ability to perceive motion, their effect on the humans they encounter is by turns narcotizing, destabilizing, and bloody. The story follows three young people as they find ways of living within a totalitarian framework that is as incomprehensible and as gorgeous as it is brutal. It’s a brilliant piece. “Trains That Climb the Winter Tree,” also a Swanwick collaboration, is another dark fantasy, though this one has a bit more of a slipstream quality. Combining the nostalgic glitter and folkloric resonance of Christmas with crisply-rendered elements of supernatural menace, the piece develops almost imperceptibly into a narrative about maturation and memory. At times gently disorienting and a bit dreamlike, its fragments coalesce in a way that feels both psychologically and aesthetically sound, and deliver a powerful and decidedly solid final blow. It’s a perfectly wonderful piece, and utterly unique, with sufficient depth and ambiguity to reward multiple re-readings.

A similarly powerful use of fragmentary narrative can be found in “Phantom Pain,” the second original story in the collection. Here, a soldier’s life is depicted as a medley of fragments, and through their rhythms and juxtapositions, the reader is able to see the interplay of love, trauma, perception, memory, consciousness, and time. Beautifully wrought, emotionally sharp, and strongly cathartic, the story is among the best in the collection.

A noted editor and critic as well as a writer, Gunn is renowned for her knowledge of and insight into speculative and fantastical literature, as well as for her original fiction. It should not be surprising, therefore, that there is a distinct “Inside Baseball” quality to several of the



pieces. “Michael Swanwick and Samuel R. Delany at the Joyce Kilmer Service Area, March 2005” is slice-of-life piece that was first published in *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, a peer-reviewed journal. The story follows real-life SF heavyweights Delany and Swanwick as they drive down a turnpike in an alternate New Jersey, looking for hamburgers and discussing the limits and rewards of

their lives as writers. The story has charm, elegance, and intellectual crunch, but readers unfamiliar with these authors may find it rather alienating. “The Steampunk Quartet” is likewise written primarily for insiders: Readers unaware of the science fiction community’s tradition “tuckerization,” or of specific work by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, China Miéville, Howard Waldrop, and K.W. Jeter may not be able to get much out of it. (Readers who have the necessary touchstones, however, will most likely find both pieces clever and rewarding.)

But that caveat aside, the book on the whole is wonderful. Ambitious, multifaceted, inventive, and rich, it is highly recommended.

1 While we’re on the subject of Gunn’s gonzo mode, I should disclose that I have a special and personal connection to one of the more gonzo stories in this book. “No Place to Raise Kids,” a very short piece, was written in 2007, at my spouse’s request, for a small, private zine that he assembled in honor of my 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. The zine was never sold or distributed to the public: it was simply run off at home on our elderly inkjet printer and handed out to the folks who showed up for the party. (Out-of-state friends who contributed to the zine received their copies by mail.) Then, not long after the streamers, cake crumbs, and half-empty bottles had been cleared away, Rudy Rucker bought the story for his online magazine, *Flurb*, where it received a proper publication. In order to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest, I will refrain from analyzing or evaluating “No Place to Raise Kids” in this review.

*A noted editor and critic as well as a writer, Gunn is renowned for her knowledge of and insight into speculative and fantastical literature, as well as for her original fiction. It should not be surprising, therefore, that there is a distinct “Inside Baseball” quality to several of the pieces.*

*...the book on the whole is wonderful. Ambitious, multifaceted, inventive, and rich, it is highly recommended.*



## An Animal Bride Tale in Post-Cultural Guise

*The Crane Wife*, by Patrick Ness, Penguin Press, January 23, 2014, 320 pp., \$26.95.

reviewed by Gord Sellar

*Stories about love can be like blindfolds, concealing the complexity of our lives and relationships, or they can be like mirrors, revealing to us things we might not otherwise see, or be willing to see.*

*It is in its engagement with this darkness that it becomes clear how Ness's book aspires to being a mirror rather than a blindfold.*

*Ness's ability to breathe life into characters in just a few short lines is unmistakable, yet Kumiko remains a cipher. One cannot help but wonder why the author opted for this kind of distancing, instead of particularizing her as Japanese, or bicultural, or utterly British, or whatever.*

Stories about love can be like blindfolds, concealing the complexity of our lives and relationships, or they can be like mirrors, revealing to us things we might not otherwise see, or be willing to see. Case in point: the differences between the Japanese story of *The Crane Wife* and its European equivalent, *The Swan Maiden*. These tales share a structure common enough to have warranted a shared taxonomy (Aarne-Thompson #402, to be precise) but their implied lessons differ subtly. *The Swan Maiden* seems to be about male marital possessiveness and a kind of romantic sadism; but in the version of *The Crane Wife* that inspired Ness—and was famously set to music by the band *The Decemberists* (whom Ness recommends as “the greatest band in the world” in his afterword to *The Crane Wife*)—the husband’s voraciousness, possessiveness, and sadism seem economic rather than marital: he locks his wife into a room to weave wondrous silk.

To adapt such a tale to a modern, Western setting is ambitious, and in many ways Ness rises to the occasion. The opening of the novel, where George is woken in the night by the cry of a wounded crane outside is masterful—its length, its breathlessness, the supreme confidence of its very slow pacing—and we are brought into George’s world at the moment of its transfiguration primarily by a wealth of evocative detail:

The arrow was long, extraordinarily so, at least four feet, and the more it resolved in the man’s vision, the more he could see that it was some kind of terrifyingly proper arrow, too, with crisply cut feathers fletched up in three evenly-spaced rows around one end and a glinting, shiny arrowhead easily the width of two of his fingers on the other. There was something weirdly ancient about it as well, something that hinted

at its carving from authentically expensive wood, not balsa or bamboo or whatever chopsticks were made of, and it was a whole world more serious than the businesslike rods you saw fired on the Olympics coverage of smaller nations.

This was an arrow for killing.

The rescued crane flies off into the night, but the next day a woman walks into George’s life: an artist named Kumiko, who turns his world upside down.

Still, the novel is not really about Kumiko, any more than the crane wife and swan maiden tales are about their eponymous animal wives: it is about the social and romantic lives of George, his daughter Amanda, and the people closest to them. These individuals Ness draws with a disarming—though at times simultaneously discomfiting—candor and vividity. Just as magic often has a dark price in fairy tales, in *The Crane Wife* the human capacity for love seems impossible to separate from human flaws like selfishness, irrationality, possessiveness, and cruelty. Ness’s characters are very believable, if at times also unlikeable.... And that goes as much for the classic brokenhearted, lonely “nice guy” type that George is as for any of them. (Who hasn’t met a “nice guy” who is, deep down, a very troubled, cruel person?) It is in its engagement with this darkness that it becomes clear how Ness’s book aspires to being a mirror rather than a blindfold.

It is difficult, though, to come to terms with Kumiko. Where other characters are richly drawn, and even her art is described in gorgeous detail, *she* remains frustratingly distant, mysterious and vaguely-outlined, from everywhere and nowhere in particular at once: on meeting her, George “couldn’t have put a finger on her nationality just then if you’d asked him,” and her age is “as difficult to fix as her origins”; later, she claims to be from “all over,” and speaks in an accent



George cannot place, though he speculates silently:

French? French/Russian? Spanish/Maltese? South African/Nepalese/Canadian? But also English, and possibly Japanese like her name but also neither or any, as if every place she may have travelled hadn't wanted her to leave and insinuated itself into her voice as a way of forcing her to take it along.

The only particularizing details that realize Kumiko, in the end, relate to her art. Of course, Kumiko is *supposed* to be a mystery to George and the others, but the contrast with *every* other character is frustrating: even those with very brief appearances, like George's ex-wife's current husband, and a long-ago school-teacher of his, are vividly humanized.

Indeed, Ness's ability to breathe life into characters in just a few short lines is unmistakable, yet Kumiko remains a cipher. One cannot help but wonder why the author opted for this kind of distancing, instead of particularizing her as Japanese, or bicultural, or utterly British, or whatever. The irony of her being emphatically post-cultural (or perhaps transcultural, like Aarne-Thompson #402), is inescapable given the degree of attention paid to George's American-ness, and his gentle annoyance at how so many Brits see Americans as homogenous, a point Ness (himself an American living in Britain) emphasizes several times:

These people, friends even, many of them highly educated, many who had visited America several times, were surprisingly difficult to budge from their assumption that, George aside (of course, of course) his 300 million compatriots were all of them passport-less, irony-hating Jesus-praisers who voted for apparently insane politicians, all the while complaining that their outrageously cheap petrol wasn't nearly cheap enough. "America is," they would say, and so confidently, without fear of



contradiction or rebuttal to anything that followed.

"The New Yorker," he would reply. "Jazz. Meryl Streep."

Possibly Ness hoped to avoid these sorts of missteps regarding Kumiko's apparent "Japanese-ness" by opting to depict her in such a vague way. She is, at least, *not* some kind of stereotypical Japanese Manic Pixie Dream Bird. Still, it's hard not to feel a little disappointed: in the West, racial, gender, and imperialist stereotypes abound regarding couples like George and Kumiko—the white, Western male and especially the "mysterious" Asian female. It's difficult not to long for a Kumiko whose human side is slightly more graspable, and thus more enchanting; to long for a figure who might carry us beyond such stereotypes and also allow for a particularized and lifelike *relationship*. At times, it is clear that even George can't explain why or how his (admittedly) almost adolescent love-at-first-sight grows into something supposedly more enduring and powerful.... I was a bit baffled, right alongside George. And after all, the Crane Wife is a *Japanese* tale: the conscious avoidance of Japanese-ness in Kumiko therefore seems odd, especially given the availability of the Western Swan Maiden tale.

Perhaps some contrast between Kumiko and the others was unavoidable, however. As I suggested above, the point of an Animal Bride tale is how human flaws and weaknesses play out in sexual or marital relationships between people

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...the point of an Animal Bride tale is how human flaws and weaknesses play out in sexual or marital relationships between people (usually men) and beguiling, impossible-to-possess supernatural partners (usually women).



## Feminist Icon in a Chain Mail Bikini

*Red Sonja, Volume 1: Queen of the Plagues*, by Gail Simone and Walter Geovanni, Dynamite Entertainment, March 2014, 160 pp., \$19.99.

reviewed by Cynthia Ward

*If you looked at the accompanying cover of Red Sonja, Volume 1: Queen of the Plagues before you started reading this review, your eyes probably popped with shock or narrowed with anger.*

*And even when an artist sexed her up, Red Sonja was the strongest female character I encountered with any regularity as a teen.*

*I even assumed they'd stopped publishing Red Sonja comics. But in the second decade of the new millennium, I discovered I'd missed generations of Red Sonja comics, from a variety of licensees. Still, I remained uninterested in revisiting the character, since—in all the decades following her creation in 1973—few women have penned stories about her.*

If you looked at the accompanying cover of *Red Sonja, Volume 1: Queen of the Plagues* before you started reading this review, your eyes probably popped with shock or narrowed with anger. The odds of either reaction went up if you were unhappy with a certain professional journal because it recently sported a controversial cover.

Your reaction to this particular cover might not be entirely negative if you grew up reading the 1970s comics that featured the original chick in a chain mail bikini: the indomitable sword-and-sorcery character Red Sonja. In those years, I thought her chain mail bikini was the stupidest-looking costume ever to appear in a comic book (where there's never a shortage of competition). Yet I was also inspired. I wanted to learn fencing, and she was supreme with a sword. And even when an artist sexed her up, Red Sonja was the strongest female character I encountered with any regularity as a teen.

This fierce, take-no-shit swordswoman debuted in *Conan the Barbarian* #23 as the more reasonably-dressed creation of writer Roy Thomas and artist Barry Smith (now Barry Windsor-Smith). They based her on a ferocious, take-no-prisoners swordswoman created by pulp author Robert E. Howard, Conan's creator, in the non-Conan historical adventure "The Shadow of the Vulture." Howard's Red-Sonya-with-a-y spends the story repeatedly saving the life of the putative hero, a sword-swinging macho blockhead who never gets an opportunity to return the favor.

I appreciated the comics about her literary "daughter," Red-Sonja-with-a-j, and kept up with her doings until writer Roy Thomas left Marvel Comics, when I moved on to *The Uncanny X-Men* and Joanna Russ. I never saw the Red Sonja movie, and I missed such capitalist-excess silliness as the Red Sonja/Spider-Man

crossover. I even assumed they'd stopped publishing Red Sonja comics. But in the second decade of the new millennium, I discovered I'd missed generations of Red Sonja comics, from a variety of licensees. Still, I remained uninterested in revisiting the character, since—in all the decades following her creation in 1973—few women have penned stories about her. (The only ones I know of are Clara Noto, Christy Marx, Louise Simonson, and Marie Javins, and while you'll find the names of Danette Couto, Cat Yronwode, and a certain Cindy Ward on the splashpage of *Conan the Barbarian* #115, none received a writing credit.)

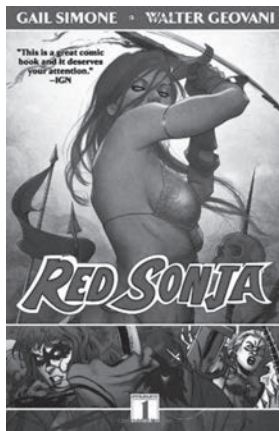
Then I heard Red Sonja was gaining a new writer: Gail Simone, who "first came to fan attention through *Women in Refrigerators*<sup>1</sup> a website founded in 1999 by a small group of comics fans, including Simone...to [identify] female superheroes who had been killed, raped, or otherwise [put through] traumatic indignities as a plot device for a male character."<sup>2</sup> I'd heard good things about Simone's comics scripting, but hadn't tried her work. So I picked up (or, more accurately, downloaded) her first Red Sonja graphic novel.

To be honest, I thought I was downloading Simone's first *issue* of *Red Sonja*. I didn't have the time to read a whole graphic novel. But I did read the whole thing, which collects all six issues of the *Queen of the Plagues* story arc, and in a single sitting, because I couldn't stop turning those virtual pages.

*Queen of the Plagues* is a reboot, jettisoning four decades of increasingly confused continuity with a new vision of Red Sonja and a mercifully rape-free new origin story. While fresh, the storyline and characterizations manage the tricky feat of remaining true to the original Marvel Comics penned by Roy Thomas. Bucking the current trend of







unremittingly (and sometimes cluelessly) bleak reboots, Simone and Geovanni retain the original comics' respectful and humor-tinged approach to the characters and material. They also tell a good, fast-paced, swashbuckling (and yes, bloody) pulp-adventure tale, without sacrificing complexity of storyline or protagonist. And the new team's Red Sonja is, like the 1970s original, a strong, self-reliant loner and a courageous, deadly warrior.

You won't mistake *Queen of the Plagues* for a 1970s reprint. Artist Walter Geovanni's strong, distinctive, and generally non-exploitive illustrations owe little to the styles of the men who drew Red Sonja in the early years (and the evolution of technology has transformed sequential art itself). Writer Gail Simone has a compelling voice and an entertain-

ing approach to plot. The pair's collaboration reflects the changes society has undergone since 1973. When it's time for a besieged city to fight, for example, everyone is expected to take up arms. Too, no woman ends up dead or hurt merely to motivate a dudebro. And a pair of wannabe-warrior sisters, assigned as Red Sonja's not-always-superfluous bodyguards, grow and change and turn into damned fine young-adult reader-identification characters.

These developments make for an engaging and egalitarian pulp adventure, but they don't guarantee perfection. A character stabbed through the thigh subsequently performs impossible heroics. The opening dialogue from a bit player, intended to reveal a lack of education, mostly just rings false. The patches of humorous dialogue won't please everyone (if you've no familiarity with sword-and-sorcery dialogue, you'll probably stop reading when you hit an in-joke line like "O she of the excellent cleavage," though it issues as one of a stream of starry-eyed superlatives from the hero-worshipping teenage girls). Other problems include the failure of the local citizenry's brown skin, described in the included script, to make it to the page (or at least to the digital ARC) and a fairly one-dimensional presentation of the various villains.

*Queen of the Plagues is a reboot, jettisoning four decades of increasingly confused continuity with a new vision of Red Sonja and a mercifully rape-free new origin story.*

*...the new team's Red Sonja is, like the 1970s original, a strong, self-reliant loner and a courageous, deadly warrior. You won't mistake Queen of the Plagues for a 1970s reprint.*

*Cont. on p. 16*

## An Animal Bride

(Cont. from p. 13)

(usually men) and beguiling, impossible-to-possess supernatural partners (usually women). In this context, the excavations of George's past—glimpses of his childhood and schooling in the Pacific Northwest, and of the singular event in his youth that changed his life—give him a kind of depth and richness that balances out what sometimes threatened to become overbearing generosity, kindness, and naiveté. Likewise, the fractured relationships of the women in George's life, including his daughter Amanda and her "frenemy" Rachel, are treated sympathetically but unflinchingly.

The result is a thoughtful exploration of how both selfishness and need press upon, obscure, and sometimes even break our relationships. *The Crane Wife* suggests that while we may wish to deny it, both traits are also inescapably human qualities, eternally part of the problem of how love is practiced not among imaginary beings of transcendent perfection in the skies, but among flawed, desperate creatures confined, for a brief time, to the ground below.

*The result is a thoughtful exploration of how both selfishness and need press upon, obscure, and sometimes even break our relationships.*

Gord Sellar was born in Malawi and grew up in Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan. He is a 2006 graduate of Clarion West. His work has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Apex Magazine*, and *Interzone*, among other venues. He lives in Saskatchewan.



*This is hardly the first time I've seen dreadlocks on a Caucasian (or, for that matter, nonhuman) comics or movie antagonist, and I suppose this is intended to be taken as a symbol of badassness. But many people "read" dreadlocks as "black" and read antagonist as "villain" and read villain as "evil" and read "dark" as "black" and "evil."*

16 © As for Red Sonja's chain mail bikini: It's still the stupidest-looking costume I've ever seen in a comic book.

*Despite the vexatious aspects of Queen of the Plagues, I'm looking forward to Gail Simone and Walter Geovanni's future volumes of Red Sonja. I'm looking for other comics by Simone.*

The exception is Dark Annisia, who is less a villain than a force of nature. A tragic antagonist, she is haunted by her past and possibly insane. Three years ago, she and Red Sonja were sisters of the sword: gladiators matched in skill, strength, and determination. Scheduled to fight to the death, they were sprung from slavery on the eve of destruction. When they finally meet again, Annisia has a major mad on for her former comrade. Love can turn easily to hate, and Annisia was in love with Red Sonja (did I mention there's a bit of a Xena-and-Gabrielle vibe to the graphic novel?). Fortunately, Annisia's antagonism is considerably more complicated than love gone wrong; and she has become, if anything, an even more dangerous opponent for Red Sonja. Perhaps less fortunately, the nature of Red Sonja's love for Dark Annisia remains precisely ambiguous.

Also less fortunate is the antagonist's nomenclature of "Dark," especially in combination with her dreadlocks. This is hardly the first time I've seen dreadlocks on a Caucasian (or, for that matter, nonhuman) comics or movie antagonist, and I suppose this is intended to be taken as a symbol of badassness. But many people "read" dreadlocks as "black" and read antagonist as "villain" and read villain as "evil" and read "dark" as "black" and "evil." Meanwhile, white protagonists never seem to sport dreads. So Dark Annisia, for all her ghost-pale skin and hair, is coded as "black bad guy." It's a very disappointing lapse.

As for Red Sonja's chain mail bikini: It's still the stupidest-looking costume I've ever seen in a comic book (although it's technically not as stupid as Conan's loincloth-only approach to battle), and it's undoubtedly a good part of the reason the character was ranked first in *Comics Buyer's Guide's* misbegotten masturbatory aid, the "100 Sexiest Women in Comics" issue.<sup>3</sup> I doubt that bikini will ever go away, for the same reason Superman's iconic costume never will.

But it seems Simone and Geovanni may share my dim view of the chain mail bikini. They replace it with rather less revealing garb early in the graphic novel, and they put Sonja and Annisia in plate armor for their final clash.

Despite the vexatious aspects of *Queen of the Plagues*, I'm looking forward to Gail Simone and Walter Geovanni's future volumes of *Red Sonja*. I'm looking for other comics by Simone. I even plan to check out *Red Sonja: Berserker*, penned by horror superstar Nancy A. Collins, creator of the badass vampire-hunter Sonja Blue (hmmm). And, for all the sexist imagery and past and present baggage, if I had teenage daughters or sons, I'd find *Queen of the Plagues* more fit for their eyes than many a young-adult title that comes to my mind.

#### Notes

- 1 <http://lby3.com/wir/>.
- 2 Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gail\\_Simone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gail_Simone).
- 3 *Comics Buyer's Guide Presents: 100 Sexiest Women in Comics*, 2011, Krause Publications.

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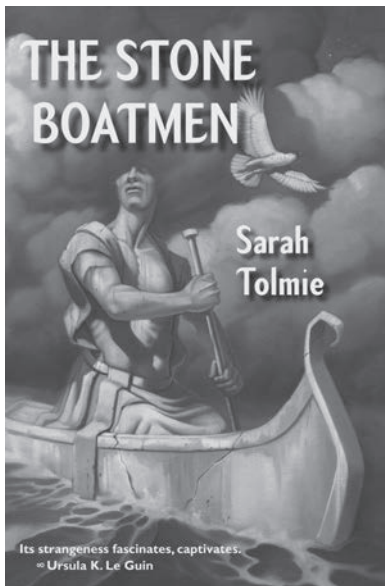
Cindy Ward is co-author with Nisi Shawl of *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* (Aqueduct Press, 2005). Her stories can be found in numerous anthologies and magazines. She lives in California.



## Science and Fantasy in Post-Apocalyptic Tension

*The Stone Boatmen* by Sarah Tolmie, Aqueduct Press, 2014, 312 pp., \$20.

reviewed by Thomas Foster



Sarah Tolmie's first novel, *The Stone Boatmen*, immediately captured my attention with its enigmatic prologue, "The Ancestor's Tale." We are told that a "senior technician" is dying, but death is immediately redefined as a transformation (iii). While the changes begin in a laboratory, we're told that his dying is not a technical process. By the end, this unnamed scientist's "consciousness lay in a thin film all over his skin, touching the leaves and the grasses, coming into contact with everything" (iv). A bird lands, their gazes merge "so that he could no longer tell the difference," and the bird flies away screaming (iv). It will later be suggested that this language is not just metaphorical.

This transformation is also the culmination of years spent undoing the work of the technician's "scientific ascendancy," in order to somehow save all life on the planet, which stands "on a precipice that only he could see" (iii). This self-destruction, and the final experience of the destruction of self, is intended to assure that "there should be no more men like himself" (iv). The paradox of deliberately engineering such an outcome by "abandoning design" or con-

trol (289), whether over the self or the natural world, turns out to be one of the central tensions in the rest of the novel. The heightened, poetic language used in the prologue to describe the extension of consciousness beyond the boundaries of the individual ego will recur in a series of beautifully written passages, from the description of a prince's identification with first his castle and then the entire world (15-16) to a woman poet's descent into silence as she strives "to be a fox, in a fox's world" (168). This relinquishing of self is a motif that unifies each of the four main sections of the novel that follow, "close to a millennium" later (68). The ambiguity of reference in the phrase "no more *men* like himself" will also become relevant as the novel proceeds.

This prologue, however, also unifies the novel (whose four main sections each feature a different focal character) at the level of genre. As suggested by the references to a "precipice" or "cataclysm... that was to come because of the ancestors' own powers" (209-210), the novel is structured around a post-apocalyptic scenario, never specified, but strongly implied to be some version of climate change and environmental collapse, possibly averted by the actions of this scientist. (We never learn whether he was part of some larger movement, or, if not, why one man's actions could have such far-reaching consequences.) More specifically, the events narrated in the body of *The Stone Boatmen* are framed by the conventions of that subgenre of science fiction in which what initially appear to be fantasy settings are revealed to be "fallen" (86) future versions of our own time, and what the characters take to be magic is revealed to be the remnants of our more advanced science and technology, now tragically (or comically, as the case may be) lost.

In Book 1, a prince's discovery that he has a working-class twin (a fact that initially has ceremonial significance) leads

*The heightened, poetic language used in the prologue to describe the extension of consciousness beyond the boundaries of the individual ego will recur in a series of beautifully written passages...*

*...the events narrated in the body of The Stone Boatmen are framed by the conventions of that subgenre of science fiction in which what initially appear to be fantasy settings are revealed to be "fallen" future versions of our own time, and what the characters take to be magic is revealed to be the remnants of our more advanced science and technology, now tragically (or comically, as the case may be) lost.*

Cont. on p. 18



## Science and Fantasy in Post-Apocalyptic Tension

(Cont. from p. 17)

*The boatmen turn out to be legible as navigational aids, once the techniques for reading them are reinvented. The statues therefore stand as a synecdoche for the shift from feudal mysteries to scientific, technical knowledge.*

18 © *Tolmie's novel performs the remarkable feat of maintaining a permanent tension between tradition (thematized as ritual) and modernity or modernization.*

*The novel...restages the history of European modernity, dramatizing a shift to democratic or "horizontal" social structures; the emergence of a fictive new culture...whose nonhierarchical, abecedarian form embodies modern, democratic principles even as its open-endedness embodies a scientific world-view.*

to the twin's insight into the practical function of relics of the ancestors stored in the palace, and specifically of a compass. That discovery in turn leads to the reinterpretation of the titular stone boatmen, enigmatic examples of the lost technical knowledge of the ancestors, which allows these statues to float off the coast of the prince's city. The boatmen turn out to be legible as navigational aids, once the techniques for reading them are reinvented. The statues therefore stand as a synecdoche for the shift from feudal mysteries to scientific, technical knowledge. Such mysteries, and their unveiling as misunderstood products of science, are conventional in this kind of post-apocalyptic narrative, which is well-trodden territory indeed, for genre readers.

However, it is both the unique treatment of these conventions and the unusual range of narrative forms and traditions synthesized within it that distinguish Tolmie's novel from its predecessors in this subgenre. Rather than treat science as the truth behind the appearance of magic, Tolmie's novel performs the remarkable feat of maintaining a permanent tension between tradition (thematized as ritual) and modernity or modernization. On her blog, Tolmie, a scholar of medieval literature, has described the novel as an attempt to imagine what it would feel like to be part of a Renaissance, but I believe this comment fails to fully capture the complexities of *The Stone Boatmen* (at least to the extent that being part of a Renaissance sounds like something to celebrate uncritically). The novel in fact restages the history of European modernity, dramatizing a shift to democratic or "horizontal" social structures; the emergence of a fictive new culture, "the Book of the New Ceremonies," which treats the rituals of the lower classes as worthy of documentation, and whose nonhierarchical, abecedarian form embodies modern, democratic principles (51, 197) even as its open-endedness embodies a scientific

world-view, a "picture of the truth as... never complete" (21); the emergence of a new concept of progressive, open-ended time rather than static or cyclic models; and the literal launching of new voyages of exploration (in this case, to reconnect the three main cities that fell "into division" [86] between the time of the prologue and the novel proper).

Within the framework of this post-apocalyptic recovery of science and its kickstarting of historical progress away from a medieval-style social order, *The Stone Boatmen* moves far beyond the generic hybridity typical of this kind of narrative, which usually combines dystopian science fiction and medieval historical fantasy or romance, though the novel does have its share of princes, guilds, bird-priests or animal familiars, oracles, doppelgangers, and clairvoyance. The novel moves from the anthropological SF of book One, "The Book of the New Ceremonies"; to the sea adventure and exploration narrative of Book Two; to the unconventional female *kunsterroman* or narrative of developing into an artist in Book Three, "The Rose Poet," which shifts the narrative focus to women characters and, somewhat ambiguously, suggests that the emergent modernization of the fictional setting results in new opportunities for gender equality. The new mobility that allows the poet Rose to travel by sea from one of the novel's three main cities to another also allows her to abandon cross-dressing as a man, in order to become a priest, in favor of the public performance of her gendered perspective, as a court poet.

By far the most original aspect of the novel, generically speaking, is found in the fourth section, "The Treasure," focused on Rose's daughter Fjorel, who achieves fame as an oracle. Tolmie's author's note expresses her fascination with medieval dream vision poetry, like *Piers Plowman* (the source of the book's epigraph). Fjorel's dream visions, however, are usually technical in nature. She dreams the plans for an automated loom (185) and through her visions recovers acupuncture techniques for facilitating



childbirth (in one of the novel's more direct nods toward non-European bodies of knowledge; Fjorel in fact is described as developing the ability to directly perceive flows of energy within these expectant mothers' bodies, in ways that it is hard not to connect to traditional Chinese conceptions of qi or chi; 223-224). This generic hybridity allows Tolmie's novel to interrogate the assumptions underlying narratives either of the triumph of science or the tragedy of its decline.

The novel's mix of genres allows it to maintain both an overarching account of modernization and a stance of ambivalence toward it, captured nicely in the simultaneous characterization of this moment in history as both a time of change, of science and progress, and a "time of marvels," of resistance toward the disenchantment of the world, through secularism and empiricism, that accompanied the actual history of the European enlightenment (208). That history is invoked in Book One, when the prince, Nerel, imagines that "the center of his palace had shifted from the throne room to the library," where "a new horizon was opening" (42). The possibility of retaining this history of modernization without some of its destructive impacts defines the utopian dimension of *The Stone Boatmen*.

One way this ambivalence is introduced is in the form of a debate between Nerel and his double Azul, over the nature of authority or mastery and whether reading is an act of submission to "the voice of the book, the voice of tradition" or a "rite" of empowerment achieved only through both repetition and transformation of the authorial voice in the present. Nerel teaches Azul the rules of grammar using a book that repeats the phrase "the master saith" (41). When Azul asks who the master is, Nerel thinks it is the book itself, but Azul insists it is the reader, arguing that only the act of reading brings "the master into being," in a way analogous to "enacting a rite" (41-42). Do books reify the truth, or does reading open the book's meaning to the future? This scene locates within tradition and

ritual the potential for change and openness to the future more typically associated with modernity and progress.

This debate about mastery echoes the scientist's attempt to undo his own work in the prologue, in order to avoid reproducing more "men like himself" (iv). This process seems to be reenacted in a fantastic scene in which Nerel for the first time successfully performs the "Light of the Mind" ritual, so that "He felt suddenly that he wore the tower, the entire palace" as a "huge and dim body" (15). This passage initially reads like an imperial expansion of Nerel's ego, a fantasy of control, as he literally identifies with the symbols of his sovereignty and then begins to experience himself, his mind and body, as coterminous with the entire territory of his kingdom. But this second expansion of his consciousness in fact breaks down the separation of viewer and viewed, subject and object, self and world, so that he "no longer looked out from the tower. Rather it was as if he had already arrived everywhere," his mind immanent in "every blade of grass," as if it had always been there and he "had just now discovered it" (15). Expansion of the ego and its projection onto the world reverses itself, resulting in Nerel experiencing his embeddedness within what is later described as "simple being" (274). Similarly, the expansion of individual agency by recovered scientific and technical means exists in tension with the limits and responsibilities imposed by living in rather than using the world, in effect by principles of sustainability.

This same tension informs the sea captain Mahar's experiences within a third city, whose uniqueness resides in its history. This city's last king abdicated in favor of an "art of rule" based on observation of the behavior of birds by a caste of priests in order "to determine...how it was that the birds ruled themselves and so, correspondingly, how the city might be governed" (85). While this form of governance initially resembles divination, Mahar comes to believe that it is in fact only a form of scientific empiricism. The birds are not holy, but

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*Cont. on p. 20*



## Science and Fantasy in Post-Apocalyptic Tension

(Cont. from p. 19)

*The novel is able to re-imagine science as both an impetus to change and progress and as an archaic, ritualized, and mysterious legacy, because that is exactly how science is conventionally represented within this subgenre... though seldom with the political and ecocritical subtext Tolmie's narrative develops....*

*As much as I admire the novel's utopian project, I must admit that it has its problematic aspects. Mahar's sea voyages tend to read like a more naively utopian attempt to reimagine the European voyages of exploration entirely in terms of their excitement, without the colonial, "civilizing" mission, and the novel therefore risks reproducing colonialism's own ideological blindness.*

*To what extent should we interpret Nerel's vision of embeddedness in the world or Harel's abdication of both manhood and kingship as critiques of masculinity, or European ethnocentrism, as well as speciesism?*

only "serve as a conduit for focusing the intelligence of the man" like "Any object of close and consistent observation" (89). But Mahar's attempt to participate in this kind of observation produces a mystical experience closely resembling Nerel's "Light of the Mind" ritual (93). The combination of visionary experience and technical knowledge in Fjorel's dreams later maintains the same ambiguous relationship between science and magic.

Book Four of the novel attempts to resolve these paradoxes. It is revealed that the bird-priests have passed down a story about how the scientist from the prologue, Harel (remembered as a king), became the first of their order. They then speculate that he transferred his power and his personality into one of the temple birds, becoming "bound by the bird's limitations" (180). Fjorel comes to believe that Harel gave up "being a man, a king" (220) and abandoned "forever the great powers of human doing," in order to link the technical knowledge of the ancestors, the "uniquely powerful things they knew, and could only have known, as men," with a more properly mystical vision of the "great plain of being that subsumed them, and him, and her, and the myriad things of the world, all together" (273). Harel both "wanted to escape or destroy the world he knew" and preserve it as a visionary experience, the form of which itself breaks down the great chain of being, the definition of the human in terms of its essential species difference. The visionary form in which the achievements of science are communicated provides a "remedy for the too-potent power of those men, including himself" (273).

As a result "the ancestors might be known, though never fully" (273). The ancestors represent a "uniquely powerful," uniquely human way of seeing, a scientific epistemology, linked in the novel with the Enlightenment motif of domination over nature and the analogizing of custom or ritual with nature, as impediments to freedom. At the same time, as one of the characters points out,

in their world "Everything of worth... was built by the ancestors" (267). The ancestors represent both the oppressive power of tradition and a progressive, scientific and technological curiosity. The measure of this novel's success as a utopian narrative is the extent to which it is able to persuasively dramatize this combination of outlooks, to achieve or at least imagine the possibility of someone somewhere achieving the "balance" or "trade" Fjorel describes, between "the claims of those things that make us alive, that make up just our simple being, and those superadded ones that make us human,...those wonders that animals and stones cannot perform" (274). In this anthropocene era, the imaginative urgency of this project can hardly be overstated. This reading of *The Stone Boatmen* and its value for our time returns us to its play with genre. The novel is able to reimagine science as both an impetus to change and progress and as an archaic, ritualized, and mysterious legacy, because that is exactly how science is conventionally represented within this subgenre of post-apocalyptic regressions to medieval fantasy, though seldom with the political and ecocritical subtext Tolmie's narrative develops, in part through her novel's resistance to treating one of these views of science as the truth and the other as ignorance or falsehood.

As much as I admire the novel's utopian project, I must admit that it has its problematic aspects. Mahar's sea voyages tend to read like a more naively utopian attempt to reimagine the European voyages of exploration entirely in terms of their excitement, without the colonial, "civilizing" mission, and the novel therefore risks reproducing colonialism's own ideological blindness. This problem is intensified by the way in which cultural differences of race and ethnicity are displaced entirely onto the differences between the three cities, characterized in terms of their respective emphases on ritual and ceremony, language, and rule by bird-priests. It is hard not to wonder how self-conscious the novel is about this rather abstract schema of differences between peoples. Is the loss of other forms



of cultural diversity a consequence of the catastrophe and therefore a symptom of the post-apocalyptic nature of the fictional world (as might be suggested by Rose's visionary retrieval of traditional Chinese medical techniques and ways of seeing), or, much more disturbingly, is the loss of diversity part of the cure the novel imagines for the catastrophe, or a consequence of Harel's scheme for averting or ameliorating it? These questions receive little attention in the novel.

I also find myself wondering whether Book Three, the story of Rose's career as a poet and her retirement into isolated domesticity and immersion in nature, should be read as a gendered version of Harel, Prince Nerel, and Mahar's visionary experiences, especially since Rose begins her retirement by interrogating her own rejection of her mother and traditional femininity, first to live as a young man and then to live as a famous poet (163-164). To what extent should we interpret Nerel's vision of embeddedness in the world or Harel's abdication of both manhood and kingship as critiques of masculinity, or European ethnocentrism, as well as speciesism? These questions are emphasized, I believe, in Fjorel's final interpretation of the meaning of the stone boatmen, those enigmatic relics of the ancestors, which all bear the same features. Fjorel argues that their message, then, is one of universality: "we are all the same. Human" (288). But, of course, they are also all male, which might be viewed as a succinct encapsulation of the problems that inevitably emerge within any attempt to distinguish "simple being" from the "superadded" things that make us human—that is, any attempt to distinguish the deep time of evolution and species differences from historical time and social differences. So are we to take Fjorel's interpretation at face value, or read it as a critical comment on the limitations of the ancestors, whose belief in the false universality of masculine power figures like Harel or the statues produced the catastrophe he tries to prevent by undoing himself, de-idealizing his own representative power?

While *The Stone Boatmen* provides less closure to these questions than I would have liked, I remain impressed with the ways in which it develops and imaginatively expands Harel's self-critique, as well as with the ways in which the novel elaborates a commentary on the shifting borders of fantasy and science fiction within the post-apocalyptic tradition it inhabits so originally.

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Thomas Foster is Professor of English at the University of Washington, Seattle, where he teaches courses on science fiction and comics. He is the author of *The Soul of Cyberfolk* and *The Oxford Handbook to Science Fiction*.

## Autonomous, Spacefaring

by Bogi Takács

We are the flesh acceding to demand—

*all systems nominal; Deena, you're ready to go*

the clash of sensory input, fingernails pushed into palms  
for the pain to drown out the noise;

after the countdown

*we are up and away*

we paint the sky a luminous red;

sending our felicitations to all points of the globe.

## Grow

by Bogi Takács

The flowers underneath my skin

struggle to bloom;

unfurl petals and break into sunlight

through layers of tissue

in gleaming red explosions—

I am a container of relentless biological love.

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Bogi Takács writes speculative fiction, popular-science articles and poetry in both English and Hungarian, including "The Tiny English-Hungarian Phrasebook for Visiting Extraterrestrials." More about eir work can be found at <http://www.prezzey.net>.



## The Swooning

by Mark Rich

Clare's slender fingers seek pitted prunes  
from her fruit bowl marked by Celtic runes.  
In her novel, knight fights, maiden swoons—

and an inner dawn threatens to break  
into blinding glare, as if to make  
light of this dim realm of the Awake.

Novel errs—a voice within tells her,  
in Clare's own tones. Just now this murmur  
stirs visions and scents of rose, fern, fir,

earth-mould underfoot in a dark wood...  
thoughts rise of promises felled, made good—  
of day plunging to night, as it should.

Once she was other than what she has been  
over these late years. Confused, boxed in,  
she strains against a world grown thin

upon a trillion glowing screens,  
lens-deep, that conceal by any means  
human depths, render to shimmer-sheens

human heart-thoughts, and make pabulum  
of news of nation, state, and kingdom:  
daily fare yields to daily boredom.

Self-styled Awakes have changed what was placed  
in their care, for the worse. What once graced  
self-aware life finds itself replaced

by low-denominator, low-cost  
mockeries of a world now lost.  
That journeyer, Human Culture, crossed

a flowing gold Styx and now arrives  
at corporate gates where chastened lives,  
finding welcome, crowd into vast hives

of compartmentalized moneybees  
thriving on low wages and high fees.  
Clare makes tea, sips. This dawning sense frees

old notions. (Awakes prefer new news,  
not old, to back up considered views  
factory-produced for all to use.)

She is thinking. A dim haze ascends  
to wreath her hair, aglow. Her mind tends  
inward, mornings; and this novel sends

her into a life she had not known  
as hers. She startles at a shriek, groan—  
clang of steel! All that she calls her own

trembles, unbalanced, and falls: her maid  
and knight, Gail-of-knives, falls beneath blade  
thrust by landthief. In this bloodied glade

Clare, too, lies with face paled like white moon,  
bleeding...not in Victorian swoon  
on fainting couch—velvet, dark maroon—

self-etherized in curtained parlor.  
Not fashion-made but forced, her pallor:  
she fades, she fails. Her lands, walls, manor—

her small wealth, modest accomplishments—  
all bleed to soil. In her field garments  
the thieves bury her, while one comments

how she almost breathes. Yet she lies still  
as they shovel. Chilled thoughts, stymied will,  
emptied heart: what victors failed to kill

lingers quiescent in unmarked grave.  
Not because clever—not because brave—  
and not truly cleaving to life, save

in the way visions have of clinging  
to shreds of hope...streamers of dreaming...  
threads in strange designs that go spreading

wherever hearts put down roots and spread;  
never quite alive, never quite dead;  
never quite fleeing, never quite fled;

nowhere a steady flame, yet nowhere  
wholly extinguished; not here, not there:  
breathed in as woodsmoke, breathed out as air

to be shared—as words, as cries, as sighs—  
she persists, awaiting waking eyes  
that might glaze, recalling ancient skies.

Printed words before Clare smudged and shook,  
while she dreamed this. She sets aside book  
to dream more. Yet what the book mistook

for swoon was not after all a mistake:  
for that which took maiden down would take  
her down by any means that would make

others see her weakness. "She stands tall  
but at feather-touch will swoon and fall."  
Her slaying must mean nothing at all.





Who are these Awakes who seal shut gates  
to dreams? Soul-harrowing toughs, ingrates,  
landthieves—or ladies and lords of states

who regulate all scenes from behind?  
We, the body; they the mind.  
They, the designers; we, the designed.

Yet if she who died in bloody field  
rises through souls when dreams come unsealed,  
then even those rulers who boot-heeled

a globe to suit their group delusions  
must once have breathed in what their minions  
breathe out in morning dream-confusions—

must once have felt a touch not their own  
from within, from fingers that have grown  
far-reaching, there beneath soil and stone.

Even if their schoolings damped and quelled  
a youthful sense that never rebelled  
into outer life, they still once held

emanations within their beings...  
reverberations...echoed beatings  
of a stilled heart...murmuring breathings.

Yet those who command by wealth and laws  
and social pressures have named their cause  
the Awakening. Capital draws

veils away: their single truth must stand  
nakedly. In a world well planned  
veils, scarves, and dresses have all been banned

to make other truths shrink in cash-cold.  
Arts matter? Yes—when arts that are sold  
are mass-produced. Children must be told

not to invent, but to dissemble  
emotions; factories assemble  
musical kits to render simple

the mass-dronings that predominate  
among songs we sing, hum, imitate  
and call our own. People must placate

inner demons with such mass fodder,  
and satiate artistic hunger  
by such means of heeling it under.

Books must have blood, death, titillation  
and mirrors for self-satisfaction,  
or else myths of self-elevation—

anything to make readers forget  
their morning alarm clocks have been set  
by needs not of their selfhoods, but debt.

What if, Clare muses, only dreamers  
are awake, and all Awakes, sleepers?  
In fake freedom from mental slumbers

they move, wide-eyed, remotely controlled  
by cash flows, their actions bought and sold  
from a distance—drones of the bankrolled.

Yet what can she do? Surely not yield  
yet again to the over-well-heeled  
now that she knows that in bloodied field

her soul once swooned into her own gore—  
that she died—that on Stygian shore  
she faded, becoming less, then more

than what she was. A spark of wisdom—  
or hope of spark—chaotic, random,  
fire-bright! A clear note, a Clare hum—

back of her throat wanting out, or in!  
Consequential noise, meaningful din,  
bated confusion too long held in—

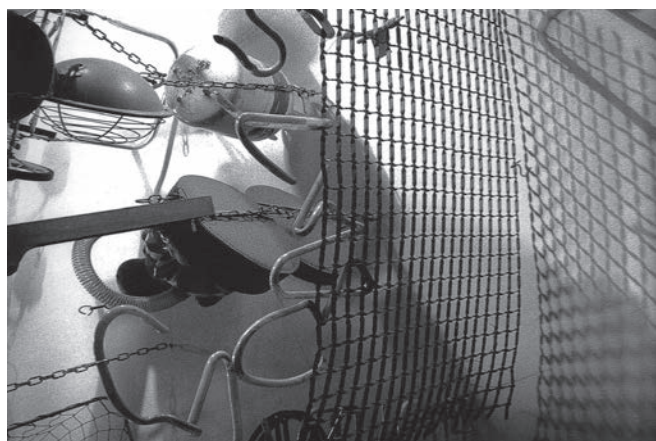
verging on incandescence, verging  
on madness, leaving her crushed, weeping,  
collapsing—as her blood starts singing!

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Mark Rich is the author  
of *C.M. Kornbluth: The  
Life and Works of a Science  
Fiction Visionary*. He lives  
in Wisconsin.



## Why I like junk — Dale McBride



*Hippo Ceiling  
with Shadows*

I am a self-taught artist. And after 50 years of doing art both privately and professionally the techniques and approaches to the various media are very intuitive. My final images are always a surprise to me because they are completely improvised. It is important to stress that my strategies and the intentions are fluid and evolve through a variety of improv techniques that arise spontaneously as a part of the process. Even so, I believe that all the media I deploy (including photography) are informed by line art and other sketching skills.

The work here is largely “looking” at recyclables and junk: reclaimed goods (from “used” stores etc.) and raw materials removed from the waste stream. My reasons for photographing junk are fairly straight forward. Worn out objects are visually stunning. There is an amazing memory etched into discarded and weathered human artifacts. “Damage” from use and exposure to the elements causes spectacularly complex and beautiful “natural” patterns to emerge. A kind of aesthetically pleasing chaos. The “molecular logic” in dings, scratches, and rust produces a rich combination of color and intricate design. Endless images are there in junk bins and recycle piles if the photographer is willing to grovel in order to get in close.

For example, the black/white image is the ceiling at the old Hippo Used Hardware store in Portland. I did a series on the store just at the time (around '90) when they were moving to their new and less interesting location. It was a

haunting study (in black and white) because the back and separate building had been mostly emptied. What remained were shadows of more than 3 decades of occupation.

I also think old stuff should be recycled. There is an obvious and urgent need to embrace the idea of sustainability. Part of photographing “junk” is to raise awareness from an aesthetic, psychological, and pragmatic point of view. Our throwaway culture is both disconnected and frightened by natural aging processes and cycles. Junk should not be dismissed as forgettable or disgusting.

Alongside my intense interest in the aesthetics and meaning of junk, this work, like all my art efforts, entails an element of play. Several interests exert an influence on how I approach my art play. These include: creative improvised music (mainly out of the jazz and classical traditions), beat and concrete poetry, linguistic philosophy, botany and ecology, free style frisbee, astronomy, psychology and, of course, the work of many artists like Max Ernst, *Jackson Pollock*, Cy Twombly, Hans Hartung, and Franz Kline. I do not, however, begin with preconceived images or didactic intentions. It is important for my creations to be instantaneous interactions with the paper, pastels, pencils, cut-up pieces (always my own), ink, and paint. Similar methods apply to my play as a photographer (lately many of my photo prints are manipulated by double exposing, cutting or ripping them up or by painting and drawing over them). If I envision or plan a piece too closely I feel as though I am erecting barriers to my need for spontaneous reactions to incredible serendipitous events which occur at EVERY INSTANT of the creative process. The words that come to mind when I describe the making of art are excitement, joy, and surprise. Above all surprise!

The great key-boardist Cecil Taylor and the English saxophonist Evan Parker have had a huge impact on my art play. Their musics are incredibly engaging but NEVER sound familiar, even after many listenings!

To view more: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/23387269@N06/>

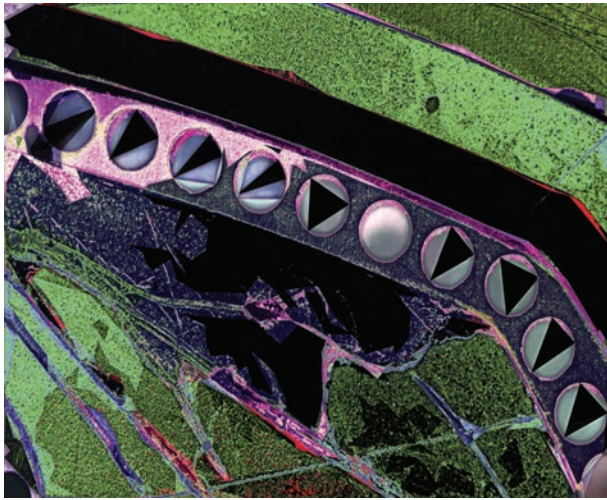




*Bring Sinks*



*Goodwill Humming*



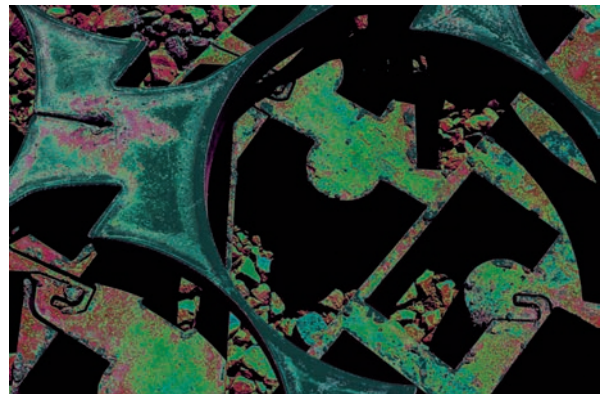
*Archeology of Trinomials*



*Sessler's Ear and Hub Control*



*Fridge Door*

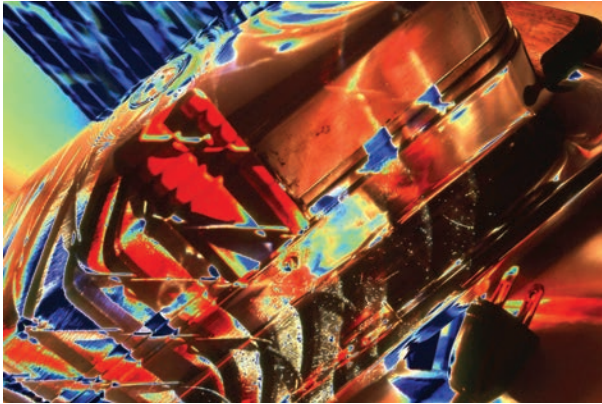


*Sessler's Iron and Shadow Works*





*Name Tag*



*Appliance Night 2*



*Quality is Job One: The Yolken Word*

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