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Paris Blues ☉ Richard O. Baker

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A Few Thoughts about Critics, Legitimacy, and Comfort

by L. Timmel Duchamp

What we need, Barthes suggested, before his death at the hand of an unseeing van driver at a *cinquième* intersection, is an “erotics” of reading—a wild and wacky idea if there ever was one.... Barthes also said, “Those who fail to reread are doomed to read the same story everywhere,” an *obiter dictum* I’ve been impressed with enough to repeat, I’m sure (a hundred, two hundred times?), far more, I’d guess, than Barthes ever did.

—Samuel R. Delany, “Reading and the Written Interview,” *Silent Interviews*, 1994.

Anxiety about the worth and legitimacy of science fiction and fantasy has preoccupied those who read and write it for generations.¹ I won’t review the history and parameters of this anxiety here, because I’ve written about it at length elsewhere, except to note that it is now becoming an acute, troubling issue for critics outside of the field as increasing numbers of “literary” authors have ventured into sfnal territory. Chris Gavalier recently noted in his article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Genre Apocalypse.”

During the second half of the 20th century, the literary universe was a simple binary: good/bad, highbrow/lowbrow, serious/escapist, literature/pulp. Like Bohr’s atomic solar system, that model has lost its descriptive accuracy. We’ve hit a critical mass of literary data that don’t fit the old dichotomies. Margaret Atwood, Michael Chabon, and Jonathan Lethem are among the most obvious paradigm disruptors, but the list of literary/genre writers keeps expanding. A *New Yorker* editor, Joshua Rothman, recently added Emily St. John Mandel to the list: Her postapocalyptic novel *Station Eleven* is a National Book Award finalist—further evidence, Rothman writes, of the “genre apocalypse.” (January 26, 2015)

In fact, “literary” writers, many of them critically acclaimed, have, in Gavalier’s sense, been “paradigm disruptors” throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Angela Carter, Anna Kavan, Christine Brooke-Rose, Hortense

Calisher, Doris Lessing, Marge Piercy, and Kurt Vonnegut are only a few of the names that spring to mind of authors who have written work clearly identifiable as science fiction. But critics, by and large, have not acknowledged the sf connection and place such authors’ work within a context that excludes science fiction from the discussion. Helen Merrick pointed this out in the chapter titled “The Genre Feminism Doesn’t See” in *The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms*, noting that the academic feminist literature has long engaged in the critical practice of cordoning off the works of feminist science fiction they find interesting, thereby implicitly disavowing any connection of individual works of feminist science fiction (including, astonishingly, even Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man*) to the “genre” or field of science fiction. Such critical strategies function by replacing the rich context of the works’ production and reception with the cleansed intellectual landscape of the critics’ own literary imaginary. Such critics assume that works of fiction must be either “high literary” (those, in short, worth the attention of critics) or “popular literature” (also known as “formula” fiction), that sf cannot ever be of interest to critics, and that therefore any work they choose to pay attention to must be “high literature.”

Gavalier characterizes Ursula K. Le Guin’s assertion that “Literature is the extant body of written art. All novels belong to it” as “accurate” but without “comfort.” The genre apocalypse is all about the discomfort and anxiety of losing the clean, clear-cut lines that have supposedly always separated “high brow” (and “middle brow,” too, though

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... “literary” writers, many of them critically acclaimed... have written work clearly identifiable as science fiction. But critics, by and large, have not acknowledged the sf connection and place such authors work within a context that excludes science fiction from the discussion.

Cont. on p. 2



Critics, Legitimacy, and Comfort (cont. from p. 1)

“The Canon” was a teaching tool used during the eras when all people with a post-secondary school education were expected to be conversant with the works of literature and philosophy considered keystones of Anglophone cultural history.

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I like to think of iterations of The Canon, as it once existed, as instruments of standardization (scales, thermometers), such as those used by fast-food franchises like Starbucks and McDonalds, who deliver exactly the same cup of coffee or hamburger at every store and to every customer...

...from the vantage of 2015, I can't help but reflect that few politicians, including those elected to the highest office, are expected even to be familiar with the names of authors favored with canonization much less have read canonical work...

that seems never to figure in this discussion) and “low brow”/popular/formula works of fiction. Gavalier is eager to see this “paradigm” smashed, but feels that it must be replaced with a new, differently judgmental, paradigm.

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When, in my late teens, I began acquiring enough books to need to sort them on my shelves, the only difficulty I grappled with was deciding how to sort the nonfiction. When I became a graduate student, that problem vanished in favor of disciplinary classification, in which interdisciplinary works were shelved in the border areas between disciplines and works within a discipline were shelved within their respective sub-fields (with the exception of philosophy, which I have always shelved chronologically by original date of publication). As for “literature”—I shelved all the poetry together (usually, again, chronologically) and all the fiction together (alphabetically by author’s last name). It never occurred to me to sort my fiction by sub-categorizations. Books that might be classified as either fiction or poetry presented the slipperiest challenge, but they never troubled me. That bookstores and libraries place science fiction in separate sections mattered to me only when browsing. Consciousness of the critical structure Gavalier describes came late to me, well after I’d started writing science fiction myself.

Discussions about how to categorize works of fiction inevitably invoke the decades-vexed question of “The Canon.” The Canon was a teaching tool used during the eras when all people with a post-secondary school education were expected to be conversant with the works of literature and philosophy considered keystones of Anglophone cultural history. “Being conversant with” included knowing the correct way of reading and understanding these texts, which of course changed with the times, as did The Canon itself. It was arguably the remnant of the tradition in which all educated men learned to read Latin (and sometimes Greek), still extant in Britain in Virginia Woolf’s youth.

While Latin was a *lingua franca* in the middle ages, allowing European travelers to communicate easily, it became, in early modern England, a means of separating male elites from everyone else. I like to think of iterations of The Canon, as it once existed, as instruments of standardization (scales, thermometers), such as those used by fast-food franchises like Starbucks and McDonalds, who deliver exactly the same cup of coffee or hamburger at every store and to every customer, turning the sons of the wealthy into similar cultural subjects.

An identifiable, singular entity called The Canon disappeared decades ago; I doubt that any five professors of English Literature would agree on which works belong in it. Where “essential readings” exist, they form part of a vast set of canons assembled to serve particular purposes, sometimes in defiance of the very notion of a single canon. Back in the 1960s, college students began demanding “relevance” from the material read, discussed, and studied in their courses. This, perhaps more than anything, put the imposition (if not the authority) of The Canon to the question. Since then, the nature of post-secondary education has changed radically; students now tend to be puzzled and even resentful when they are asked to address material that seems in any way irrelevant to their current or future lives. Once the assumption that every educated person must have studied Plato’s dialogues (either in Greek or in Jowett’s execrable translation), Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and Jacob Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance* vanished, the chief reason for subscribing to something called “The Canon” also vanished. And now, from the vantage of 2015, I can’t help but reflect that few politicians, including those elected to the highest office, are expected even to be familiar with the names of authors favored with canonization much less have read canonical work (or even be able to speak in complete sentences). The gap between the political and economic elites who run the US and those who are conversant with The Canon (largely older academics) is so vast as to suggest that



any argument about The Canon (what it should be or whether one universal canon exists) is simply academic.

Another important change rendering The Canon anachronistic was a widespread admission that context, which constantly shifts, is significant in both determining relevance and in interpreting texts (or any other content). Context is of course jettisoned by mass media news reporting (not to mention the US Government) whenever it presents too great a challenge to orthodoxy; “American exceptionalism” is a case in point, but certain US states’ efforts to eliminate mention of persons and events from history textbooks indicates that politicians understand better than anyone just how important it is to control context. In theory, at least, in 2015 the sophisticated reader or critic will at the least pay lip service to the importance of, say, historical and social context for interpreting both texts and events. What twenty-first century critic could now seriously advance the idea prevalent not much more than half a century ago that any piece of great literature has one true meaning, regardless of the reader’s particular location in time and place (much less the specifics of gender, race, ethnic, and other particulars)? When most people speak now of “universal truths,” they no longer do so with unquestioned confidence; when they are not being ironic, they are usually speaking with wistful nostalgia and, in some cases, deep unease.

Besides serving the desire to set standards for preserving a collective understanding assuring the maintenance of an intelligible weltanschauung shared among the cultural elite, the very notion of The Canon produces a general sense of confidence that aesthetic judgments aren’t merely a matter of personal taste. And yet the category of aesthetic perception is itself relatively new to European experience,² with roots in the early modern period and a flowering during the Enlightenment, when philosophers, most notably Immanuel Kant, took pains to develop the area of philosophy known as aesthetics in order to establish a philosophical basis for universal

judgments of art. Marx challenged this regime, of course, as did many artists, including Modernist composers using jazz in their works. Among the most-discussed threats to the regime was the Pop Art movement, which insisted on defying distinctions between “high” and “low” art. Moreover, accumulating work by feminist scholars initially provoked by the question of how so many women writers, well known in their day, posthumously vanished from literary memory has generated insight not only into how literary anthologists, over the centuries, have carefully kept gender proportions constant through deletions and obliterations of past critical judgments, but also into how The Canon has been continually reformed to reflect shifts in taste.

My view is that many critics still cling to the notion of The Canon as a means of legitimizing their taste and believe that reference to it will authorize and validate their own critical judgments.³ This is, I think, why The Canon seems to arise so frequently in discussions of “genre literature.” What, after all, is the basis for critics’ confidence in their own critical judgments? Critical structures are helpful, as is critical consensus. But as critical consensus fractures, the fact that standards for critical judgment are constantly changing becomes uncomfortably pressing, however unacknowledged.

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Here I’d like to make a brief excursion exploring a few observations from my own experiences relating to texts variously as reader, writer, reviewer, and publisher. I’ve long been fascinated with how differently the same work can be read—by multiple readers, or even by the same reader approaching the text at different times of their lives. Samuel R. Delany’s *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* first introduced me to a close examination of how science fiction, in particular, is read, and I’ve always found his examination useful to me both as a writer and a writing instructor. It didn’t, however, help me much in understanding how, when reading sf publications in the 1980s and 1990s, my own understanding and judgment of the work I read was so often at

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I’ve long been fascinated with how differently the same work can be read—by multiple readers, or even by the same reader approaching the text at different times of their lives.

Cont. on p. 4



Critics, Legitimacy, and Comfort (cont. from p. 3)

I learned early in my publishing career that the initial reception of a book can be influenced by the way in which it is framed and presented to reviewers, sometimes to an astonishing degree, and that it isn't at all rare for reviewers to follow the lead of earlier reviews.

variance with that of the many reviews I encountered. A simple answer presented itself to me when I discovered that my views were often shared by others (usually women readers) but were mostly unrepresented in the print world. I began regular reviewing in order to give voice to that unrepresented perspective. (That perspective, more than a decade later, is now fairly well represented.) Can one's social, political-ideological, and gender locations have that much to do with one's aesthetic judgments? I think the answer to that has become obvious to some in the sf/f sphere, though many people continue to resist it.

What is less obvious, however, is how an awareness of the interestedness of aesthetic judgment impacts reviewers and critics. As a publisher, I'm acutely aware of both critical and reader response to the books I introduce to the reading public. Publishers don't, of course, send the texts they publish out into the world unclothed and unsupported. Titles, covers, blurbs, descriptions, and press releases usually accompany texts, as, often, do photos of the author, interviews with the author, and a variety of other accessories. I learned early in my publishing career that the initial reception of a book can be influenced by the way in which it is framed and presented to reviewers, sometimes to an astonishing degree, and that it isn't at all rare for reviewers to follow the lead of earlier reviews. My experience as a reviewer helped me understand how this could be. The first task a reviewer faces is how to characterize what a book does or is trying to do. That task is easy when the book can be neatly slotted into a familiar subcategory or even into the author's existing oeuvre, but can be challenging when the book is pretty much sui generis; in such cases, press releases, blurbs, etc. conveniently provide a framework for talking about the book, either by repeating the story they tell or by taking the framework provided and writing against it. Reviews are also often influenced by earlier reviews of a book and buzz about the book on social media and blogs that create an atmosphere of hype. Once a book becomes

an object of hype, reviewers tend to either repeat the hype or react against it.

Conscientious, thoughtful reviewers on occasion suffer a tremendous sense of unease and doubt about their own judgment when that judgment is a lone voice in opposition to critical consensus. This happened to me when reviewing a book that had received high literary accolades (including praise from the *New York Times*) but no actual substantive review that could give me an idea for the basis of such praise. (I was later bemused to note that the book made the annual *Locus* Recommended Books list though *Locus* had not run a single review of it.) I sensed that I didn't understand the book because I lacked the appropriate frame of reference for appreciating it, and so early drafts of my review ran to 10,000 words trying to explain why I thought it was a bad book, running through all the various ways I had tried to read it in order to make it work. I was repeatedly struck by the testimonial statement made by the book's editor that he found the book so powerful that since reading the ms not a day had passed that he hadn't thought about it. What am I missing? I asked myself as I reduced the ms in successive drafts to a relatively succinct discussion of my struggle to find a way to read it. Years later, although in my heart of hearts I believe that the book is a case of the Emperor's New Clothes, a part of me still suspects it fell into a critical blind spot of mine that I can only suspect is there. Even unexplained and unelaborated, critical consensus exerts a powerful authority. The one certain way to avoid unease, of course, is to enjoy the company of other critics in the judgments one makes.

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I want to return now to the importance that the ways in which we read have for the judgments we make about the texts we read. Gavalier mentions Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, a National Book Award finalist, as an example of work that is bringing about a supposed genre apocalypse. Kirstyn McDermott and Ian Mond discussed

Conscientious, thoughtful reviewers on occasion suffer a tremendous sense of unease and doubt about their own judgment when that judgment is a lone voice in opposition to critical consensus.



the book at length on their excellent, insightful *The Writer and the Critic* podcast, on December 17, 2014;⁴ Mond liked the book immensely, whereas McDermott took serious issue with it.⁵ Matt Cheney later critiqued the book on grounds similar to McDermott's, but more harshly; he found it morally reprehensible. It struck me, while listening to the podcast, that McDermott's criticism of the book followed lines similar to my own criticism of another—literary, well-received—novel with an sfnal premise, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005).

Part I of Ishiguro's novel (roughly one-third of the text) engaged me as an sf reader, by which I mean I read it via sf reading protocols. Having so begun, I continued—and faltered as the world in which the story was set became increasingly unbelievable, until finally it occurred to me that the book was probably meant to be read as a literary novel based on a fantastic conceit, not as science fiction. The novel supposes that in the middle of the twentieth century the British national health system began cloning specific human beings to be used as personalized organ banks tailored to individuals. The world envisioned in the novel is not discernibly different from our own world, nor is the state and practice of science or medicine. Worse, the author apparently thought so little about the economics of bureaucratized cloning that the personal finances of the clones are never clarified. They are provided with room and board but no cash; yet somehow, when it comes to an episode requiring them to be sitting together in a café, they have spending money. Unfortunately, once one begins to tug at the threads of a poorly woven world, it quickly unravels, leaving the characters who are the focus of this fantasy standing alone, unsupported by either physical or social setting. A reader who mistakenly reads with sf protocols begins to pose one question after another, until the irrationality of the premise itself is revealed. How could certain facts not keep intruding on my efforts to imagine the story's world and characters? We know as facts, for instance, that

human organs are easier to clone than human beings; that attempts to clone mammals have between a 0.1 and 3 percent success rate at the embryonic stage; that clones tend to have abnormally large organs; and that clones seem to die early and be susceptible to a range of physical disorders, particularly diseases of the lung. Given those facts, how could I not then begin suspecting that the author, having read of the (all too limited) success of Dolly, a sheep it took 277 tries to produce and who died young (before the publication of the novel), and having read the hype and rumors of clandestine human cloning programs, conceived the fantasy premise that would allow him a comfortably improbable example of humans used as mere instruments for others' comfort and well-being that he could (improbably) project back into an earlier historical era—without doing any actual research of the subject and without having to imagine how such a technological leap would impact not just the individual clones but the entire world needed to accommodate their existence?

Delany has written and talked often about the importance of using the correct protocol for reading texts. In "The Semiology of Silence, the *Science Fiction Studies* Interview," he describes what happens when one mistakenly reads Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" as science fiction (not so unlikely for those, new to the story, who might come across it in an sf/f anthology). He gives the first sentence: "One morning, waking from uneasy dreams, Gregor Samsa, still in bed, realized he'd transformed into a huge beetle." And then he comments: "The moment we recognize the situation as nonnormal (because it's SF, in most cases we don't even cognize it as fantastic), certain questions that are associated with SF come into play: 'What in the *world* portrayed by the story is responsible for the transformation? Will Samsa turn out to be some neotenous life form that's just gone into another physical stage? Or has someone performed intricate biomechanical surgery during the night?'" (30-31)

The difference between "The Metamorphosis" and *Never Let Me Go*, how-

...once one begins to tug at the threads of a poorly woven world, it quickly unravels, leaving the characters who are the focus of this fantasy standing alone, unsupported by either physical or social setting. A reader who mistakenly reads with sf protocols begins to pose one question after another, until the irrationality of the premise itself is revealed.

Delany has written and talked often about the importance of using the correct protocol for reading texts.

Cont. on p. 6



Critics, Legitimacy, and Comfort (cont. from p. 5)

Gavaler's solution to the "genre apocalypse," sadly, is where he loses me.

There is overlap, as Delany notes, in the interpretive conventions of sf and "narrative realists," but the two forms are as comparable as apples and oranges.

...works that blend both sets of conventions or switch between them must be judged on a case by case basis. Sometimes we can unequivocally claim one as sf, or another as literary, sometimes it must be read as both...

ever, is that the latter spends more than a hundred pages encouraging the reader to eke out the workings of an alternative world, offering up mysterious fragments the reader must put together to make sense of. Readers new to "The Metamorphosis" may do that for a few sentences, but will soon realize that an sf reading protocol is inappropriate. Does *Never Let Me Go* work for those who, unfamiliar with the protocols for reading sf, read it as a literary novel? I couldn't say, myself, because the first third of the book demands that those versed in sf read it as sf. By that point in the reading, I found it impossible to switch reading protocols. (I don't mean to contend, though, that it is never possible to switch protocols midstream. In the hands of a skillful writer, such switches can be made to extraordinary effect.) Perhaps the author was unaware that he was eliciting the use of sf reading protocols. In any case, *Never Let Me Go* exemplifies the perils of incorporating sf tropes into what, in the last half of the book, was clearly intended to be literary fiction.

The *quality* of a work of fiction cannot be assessed when the protocol used to read it is inappropriate. Read as an sf novel, *Never Let Me Go* is mediocre at best. Since I can't ignore the sfnal questions the tropes it uses inexorably raise, I'm not fit to judge the novel by literary standards. Still, as Delany points out in "The Semiology of Silence," "at the codic level, the two complexes of interpretive conventions (literature's and SF's) interpenetrate and overlap in many ways." (31) "The overlap," he continues, "is so great that worrying about the purity of the genres on any level is even more futile than worrying about the purity of the races." This overlap, I suspect, is as much part of the confusion generated by what Gavaler calls "paradigm disrupters" as anxiety about legitimacy is.

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Gavaler's solution to the genre apocalypse, sadly, is where he loses me. He cites an interesting experiment he and a colleague have been conducting, in which students read two versions of a single story:

One takes place in a diner, the other on a spaceship. Aside from word substitutions ("door" and "airlock," "waitress" and "android"), it's the same story, the same inference-rich exploration of characters' inner experiences. When asked how much effort was needed to understand the characters, the readers of the narrative-realist scene reported expending 45 percent more effort than the sci-fi readers. The narrative realists also scored 22 percent higher on a comprehension quiz. When asked to rate the scene's quality on a five-point scale, the diner landed 45 percent higher than the spaceship. The inclusion of sci-fi tropes flipped a switch in our readers' heads, reducing the amount of effort they exerted and so also their understanding and appreciation. Genre made them stupid. (2015)

It may well be that a lack of familiarity with sf reading protocols makes readers "stupid." But that is not exactly what Gavaler is suggesting. He is suggesting that the furniture of sf—the bare invocation of tropes—is alone responsible for readers' not getting sf. In fact, the story he describes, one whose sfnalness consists only of word substitutions, would be rejected out of hand by almost any sf editor. The presence of certain words ("airlock" and "android") doesn't make a work science fiction. There is overlap, as Delany notes, in the interpretive conventions of sf and "narrative realists," but the two forms are as comparable as apples and oranges. Delany goes so far as to suggest that the difference between sf and narrative realism is as great as that between novels and poetry. Yes, they are both fruit; but what makes an apple first-rate is in some respects quite different from what makes an orange first-rate. Each must be judged on its own terms.

So, too, I would argue, works that blend both sets of conventions or switch between them must be judged on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes we can unequivocally claim one as sf, or another



as literary, sometimes it must be read as both—as, I think, to cite another recent example, Monica Byrne’s *The Girl in the Road* (2014) must be. But please, please, let us stop trying to create some Great Chain of Being of Western Literature onto which every fiction ever written can be placed. Notions of quality have never been static, ever (not even during the supposedly static European Middle Ages). Only a couple of centuries ago, poetry was considered as superior to texts of fiction as most traditional critics consider narrative realism superior to science fiction.

Losing a unitary scale by which to judge all varieties of literature may be, for some as it is for Gavaler, lacking in “comfort,” but when has comfort ever been either the driver of or the most desirable end for powerful art? Delany seconds Barthes’ suggestion that what we need is an erotics of reading. The erotic is all about the individualized (as opposed to standardized) grain of desire and creativity. It cares nothing for categorization, rules, and clear patrilineal lines of descent. It forces one to balance on the highest wire one is willing to brave without a net. At its most powerful, it is scary as well as exhilarating.

Should not critics become as bold and risk-taking as those who create the texts they critique? Doing so would mean, before all else, abandoning concerns about legitimacy—either their own or that of the texts they choose to work with. That may be too much to ask. But it is, after all, what ambitious writers do all the time.

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Notes

- 1 Thanks to Dr. Josh Lukin for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.
- 2 Jacques Rancière traces the development of what he calls “the aesthetic regime of art” (“a regime of perception, affection and thought”) in *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, tr. Zakir Paul. New York: Verso, 2013).
- 3 I develop this theme in “Real Mothers, A Faggot Uncle, and the Name of the Father: Samuel R. Delany’s Feminist Revisions of the Story of SF” in Kenneth R. James, ed. *Cruising the Disciplines: A Symposium on Samuel R. Delany*, *Annals of Scholarship* Vol. 20 (2013).
- 4 *The Writer and the Critic*, December 17, 2014 (<http://writerandcritic.podbean.com/e/episode-41-hild-and-station-eleven/>).
- 5 Interestingly, McDermott noted with some irritation the importance, in the novel, of preserving The Canon (in particular, Shakespeare); a traveling troupe devoted to bringing culture back into the world lavishes all their energy on bringing Shakespeare to the beleaguered survivors of apocalypse—not to bringing new art into the world to make sense of its dire state and their own traumatic histories.

Losing a unitary scale by which to judge all varieties of literature may be, for some...lacking in “comfort,” but when has comfort ever been either the driver of or even the most desirable end for powerful art?

Should not critics become as bold and risk-taking as those who create the texts they critique?

L. Timmel Duchamp is the author of the Marq’ssan Cycle as well as *Love’s Body*, *Dancing in Time*, and *Never at Home*. She is the founder and publisher of Aqueduct Press.





The Logic of the Elements

by Delia Sherman

Fire Logic was not like any fantasy I'd ever read before.

In the '90s, when Laurie began working on Fire Logic and its sequel, Earth Logic, high fantasy was not, by and large, concerned with realism.

“We have to know all sides, especially the inside.” — *Water Logic*

I first read Laurie Marks's *Fire Logic* in 1993, when she handed in the first few chapters for our writing group meeting. It was the kind of writing group designed to support you through your first draft, so the chapters were pretty rough, but one thing was immediately clear to me.

Fire Logic was not like any fantasy I'd ever read before.

Oh, it had literary parents—no novel, however ahead of its time (and *Fire Logic* was definitely ahead of its time) is entirely without precedents. Ursula K. Le Guin wrote books with diverse characters in carefully-thought-out cultures, M.J. Engh wrote about communal marriages, and Elizabeth Lynn imagined societies in which men and women were equal and all sexual orientations normal. These ideas, however, though revolutionary enough in themselves, were not what made me sit up and take notice.

The land of Shaftal felt absolutely real.

In the '90s, when Laurie began working on *Fire Logic* and its sequel, *Earth Logic*, high fantasy was not, by and large, concerned with realism. In the world of mass market paperback originals, backgrounds were mostly sketched in and non-European cultures were exoticized. Plots were heavily influenced by games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and characters tended towards the archetypal. Good guys were good, evil guys were evil, and women (unless they were swordswomen who fought like men) existed to tempt or be rescued.

However fun this kind of world is to read about (and it was, although less so if you were a woman or a member of an exoticized culture), it is not real. It is highly-colored and grand, full of impossibly high stakes and huge emotions and unrelenting suspense, all of which is brought to a neat and satisfying conclusion at the end of the series.

The Elemental Logic books are not like that.

The series' overarching plot is built around war and race and the damage colonizing an inhabited nation does to both colonized and colonizers. In *Fire Logic*, the small, prosperous, and mostly peaceful country of Shaftal is invaded by the Sainites. The Shaftali are finally goaded into fighting back, and the guerrilla war that ensues threatens to destroy not only the Shaftali themselves, but their entire culture.

A great deal of this culture is built on and around a system of magic that is one of Marks's most original achievements. It is not a formal magic, with rules and rituals and a set price to be paid for power. It is innate, organic, a gift of Shaftal itself. Every child is born with some balance of elements in their character: Earth gives life, growth, stability; Fire gives insight, intuition, language; Water gives humor, acceptance, a mastery of time; Air gives order, clarity, intellectual rigor. When a child's psychology tips heavily towards one element, s/he is an "elemental blood," possessing a noticeable talent for a particular set of skills. And when s/he is "pure blooded," s/he is an elemental witch, a force of nature.

The culture that grows out of this magic is a rich and flexible one, based on balance and philosophy, fairness and discipline. It is also a perfect vehicle for Marks to ring some very interesting changes on real-world problems: how to forgive the unforgivable, how to learn to coexist with those who have wronged you even if you don't forgive them, how to accept change, how to deal with conflict without using violence. The solutions Marks offers are, at bottom, real-world, too: learning to listen, discovering that your enemy is not monstrous but as human as you are, finding endurable compromises between extreme positions,



voting them into law, and abiding by them. For Marks, there is no one right answer, no one ultimate good solution, but a diversity of paths towards the complex, messy, multi-voiced organism that is a living society.

To this end, Marks creates multiple protagonists on both sides of the war, men and women who are trying to ensure the survival of their people, all courageous and principled, all capable of doing terrible things in the name of freedom. No character, however sympathetic, is unsullied. The narrative demonstrates, over and over, that everybody is human, that heroism or villainy is a function of whether an individual serves or undermines the safety and well-being of their community, and that any group of people, however defined, is best served by finding common cause with other groups, even if the two groups have spent the last twenty years killing each other.

It is notable that the only irredeemable characters in Marks's world are the inflexible, the morally rigid, and the self-righteous who try to impose their narrow conceptions of order and honor on the inhabitants of an entire country. Thus, a zealot leader and his single-minded followers threaten Shaftal's survival as much as the invading Sainite soldiers. The true villains among the Sainites are the generals who stick stubbornly to the oppressive structure of their old warlike culture.

Over the course of the three volumes that have been published to date, Marks demonstrates how it is possible to learn flexibility by teaching and accepting the teaching of others—habits of thought as well as practical things like language and cooking and metalwork. She shows how coexistence is forged through talking together, working together, being hungry and cold together, being threatened together. It doesn't always work, but it works often enough to make a beginning that can be built on over time.

Air Logic, the fourth volume of the series (which I am lucky enough to have read in draft) promises to bring her narrative to a satisfying conclusion, while making it clear that there is no such

thing as a guaranteed happily ever after for a country. Societies, Marks is showing us, are never static. Like any living organism, they mutate, suffer diseases and accidents, and recover or accommodate to their new circumstances. If they don't, they die.

Like many books that are ahead of their time, *Fire Logic* and *Earth Logic* did not enjoy a sufficiently wide readership when they were published. Both novels won Gaylactic Spectrum Awards and garnered admiring reviews, but their determinedly unexotic depictions of difference and clear condemnation of homogeneity kept them from going big in the mainstream. Readers from marginalized groups, however, adored them. A number of young writers have said these books served as the foundation for their own fictional explorations of the themes of otherness, cooperation, and coexistence. It is good that Small Beer Press has made *Fire Logic* and *Earth Logic* available again. They published *Water Logic* in 2007. With *Air Logic* coming soon (also from Small Beer), visionary author Laurie Marks's Elemental Logic Series will be complete.

The time for these remarkable books has come at last.

For Marks, there is no one right answer, no one ultimate good solution, but a diversity of paths towards the complex, messy, multi-voiced organism that is a living society.

Air Logic, the fourth volume of the series... promises to bring her narrative to a satisfying conclusion, while making it clear that there is no such thing as a guaranteed happily ever after for a country.

Societies, Marks is showing us, are never static. Like any living organism, they mutate, suffer diseases and accidents, and recover or accommodate to their new circumstances. If they don't, they die.

Delia Sherman is a fantasy writer and editor. Her novel *The Porcelain Dove* won the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award. From 1996-2004 she was a consulting editor at Tor Books, and since 1993 she has been a full-time writer, lecturer, and teacher.



Of Aliens, Lovers, and Others

Three Songs for Roxy, Caren Gussoff, Aqueduct Press, 2015, 110 pp., \$12.00.

reviewed by Victoria Elisabeth Garcia

... beneath its breezy surface, intricate and powerful games are being played with ideas of self and family, alienness and identity.

Three Songs for Roxy is a charming and challenging new work from novelist and former *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* Geek of the Week, Caren Gussoff. The book is a triptych of near-future SF stories that center on the life and attempted retrieval of Kizzy, an extraterrestrial raised from infancy by a Roma family in Seattle. At a slim 110 pages, the book is an enjoyable and fast read, but beneath its breezy surface, intricate and powerful games are being played with ideas of self and family, alienness and identity.

Gussoff began her fiction career outside the SF world. (Her first novel, *Homecoming*, is a murder mystery that explores addiction, belonging, and inherited trauma. Published by High Risk Books in 2000, it was followed in 2003 by *The Wave and Other Stories*, a collection of short pieces in a similar vein.) Gussoff's facility with the tools of mimetic fiction serves the current work well: Kizzy is a beautifully limned character.

Kizzy is grounded by an understated but convincingly alien physicality (an awkward height; hands lacking detail and proportion; skin that, at unpredictable intervals, hardens into a silvery, painful husk and starts to peel.) Yet, the most remarkable aspect of her character is a kind of warm and easy ordinari-ness: Kizzy (and the reader) never lose sight of her extraplanetary beginnings, but we experience her most powerfully as a sister, a daughter, a coworker, and a self-possessed and self-determined soul. Gussoff's wondrous flair for rendering everyday life under SFnal circumstances is reminiscent of both Kate Wilhelm and Maureen McHugh.

And Kizzy's extraterrestriality is not the most distinctive marker of difference that she bears. In the book's first story, "Free Bird," Kizzy makes a bold and immediate lexical announcement of her otherness: Before the third paragraph's end, we've been introduced to *Káko* Fatlip and warned that an impending

visit from a *chav* could mean that Kizzy and her sister might become *bori* soon. This barrage of unfamiliar language is a compositional move that generations of SF writers have been trained to avoid: Introduce too many strange words at once and you risk confusing the reader and putting her on edge. A more gradual, sense-driven immersion lessens readerly resistance and allows her to slip with comfort and confidence into an imagined world. But what Gussoff has done here is not a mistake: it's intentional, and highly effective. This is a story about identity and tribalism, belonging and alienation, and Gussoff wants us to notice every bit of disorientation we experience as we move between modes of being.

Thus sensitized, we feel, sharply, the many moments when expectations are inverted and assumptions crumble. For instance, Kizzy's language is not, as we anticipate, an SFnal conceit: the unfamiliar words are Romani words, and they give name to wholly non-fantastical aspects of Kizzy's life as a young member of a Roma community.

Gussoff, herself of Roma heritage, is one of the very few SF authors, alive or dead, who have written about Roma people from the perspective of lived experience. It's important to take note of that, because the SF corpus contains so very many texts that include Roma characters, or that employ Roma plot tokens; that were inspired by Roma history and culture, or that play on the culture's externally imposed mystique. And while these works vary wildly in terms of quality, accuracy, and degree of respect shown their subject, the fact remains that almost none of them are the work of self-identified Roma authors. Those voices, so conspicuous in their absence, are sorely needed. Though it is, of course, far from a complete solution, the publication of this book (along with the work of other veteran and emerging Roma



authors) can be viewed as a decidedly hopeful step.

But the book is not just an exploration of the Roma/extraterrestrial experience in America: its scope is far broader than that. In the second story, “Across the Universe,” Gussoff makes an agile leap into the point-of-view of Scott Lynn Miller, Kizzy’s former coworker and would-be suitor. Having witnessed the locally cataclysmic return of Kizzy’s birth family, Scott, now touched with PTSD, has taken his child and gone on the run. Driving from interstate motel to interstate motel, the two hide their faces under the brims of heavy, ear-flapped hats and have screaming fights about haircuts and hamburgers. When he’s not driving, eating, or tacking towels over motel windows, Scott seeks out a series of UFO experts, hoping that following their counsel will help him rebuild his sense of security and reestablish his sense of the real. Alas, in his self- and UFO-centric monomania, he fails to recognize both his child’s fundamental identity and emerging, independent agency, until it is too late.

“Across the Universe” contains some of the most powerful writing in the book. In one passage, Gussoff shows us how Scott’s already-shaky marriage weakens and fails as the family makes their way through the chaos of post-Katrina New Orleans. Ably conveying both Scott’s numb confusion and the absolute inevitability of the split, Gussoff’s narration is both generous and clear-eyed, and it delivers a gut-punch. Elsewhere in the piece, meditations about Scott’s high school job as a chicken-sexer in a factory farm prove more luminous, and more fascinating, than poultry has any right to be.

Alas, the story’s overall structure is not as well-conceived as its individual parts. The plot-line about alien contact and the plot-line about Scott’s failures to connect with the people in his life do not complement each other especially well. Reaching their moments of crisis simultaneously, they undercut where they should reinforce, and as a result, the story’s ending produces a feeling of

deflation and mild befuddlement instead of the devastation that either plot-line could have delivered on its own.

Like the other two, the final story, “Seven Wonders,” contains a goodly ration of miracles, heartbreak, and beauty, but it is also the most frustrating of the three. Here, we follow Natalie, an alien who is sent to retrieve Kizzy, but who falls in love with Kizzy’s sister, Roxy, instead.

Specifically bred for her mission and rigorously but incompletely trained, Natalie is dropped on Planet Earth equipped with little more than a satchel of supplies and a purpose. Finding herself in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco, she quickly befriends Steve, a middle-aged drag performer possessed of a giving heart and a bone-deep well of sorrow. At his side she learns about Thai food, music, fashion, and friendship. Reaching out through the internet, Natalie writes about these experiences to Roxy, and as she writes, she enhances her capacity for love, empathy, and self-direction, eventually going well beyond anything her creators intended—and beyond the parameters of her mission.

The parts of the story that focus on Natalie, Steve, Roxy, and San Francisco are lovely and full of light. On their own, they would be a sweet, strange, and affecting *bildungsroman* in miniature. This loveliness is coarsened, however, by the bits of the story that involve the rest of alien society.

The aliens are presented as a monoculture of scientists, united in the cultural imperative to gather knowledge. (Kizzy, we learn, was placed on Earth as a kind of participant-observer.) Though a few aliens, such as Natalie’s trainer (her “Ooya”), are granted the capacity to nurture, the majority of the aliens appear to be inscrutable, cold, and machine-like. (“I miss her,” Natalie tells them, but she must use English. The aliens have neither a cognate for the word “to miss,” nor an understanding of the concept.) A tendency to speak in officious command-phrases gives the aliens an unfortunate, Dalek-like quality, which does not help. As a result, they read as a flip and decidedly retro caricature.

[T]he book is not just an exploration of the Roma/extraterrestrial experience in America: its scope is far broader than that.

This is a story about identity and tribalism, belonging and alienation, and Gussoff wants us to notice every bit of disorientation we experience as we move between modes of being.

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Cont. on p. 13



The Instrumental Artist

Cortez on Jupiter, by Ernest Hogan, Digital Parchment Services/Strange Particle Press, December 2014/March 2015, 256 pp., \$3.99/\$9.99.

reviewed by Cynthia Ward

...you could describe veteran science fiction writer Ernest Hogan's newly reprinted 1990 debut novel as standard genre fare....
...that description misses everything, because the novel undermines expectations on practically every front.

[T]he protagonist is a Mexican-American painter. A working-class convenience store clerk and a son of college-educated intellectuals, Pablo Cortez embodies, in thought and deed and DNA, both colonial oppressor and disenfranchised oppressed...

Really, Hogan's entire novel is subversive.

The author's most fundamental subversion is in the language itself.

"Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy."

— Pablo Picasso, as quoted in *Cortez on Jupiter*.

On the one hand, you could describe veteran science fiction writer Ernest Hogan's newly reprinted 1990 debut novel, *Cortez on Jupiter*, as standard genre fare: Hero battles seemingly insurmountable odds and beds beautiful women on his way to winning at the story's climax. On the other hand, that description misses everything, because the novel undermines expectations on practically every front. This creates a fundamental challenge for the reviewer: Where to begin?

Perhaps with the protagonist. Archetypally orphaned in childhood and nonconformist in adulthood, he rises (literally) from the mean cyberpunk'd streets to face lethal aliens. What are his weapons? "Industrial multipaint guns with cyber-aided color mixing and switching capabilities as well as adjustable spray nozzles adapted for maximum expressive possibilities, allowing complex painting to be created at high graffiti speed." Also, fingers. Also, crayons. And, even in freefall, he's an undauntable swashbuckler. "[L]ike a samurai Jackson Pollock, I scream and thrash the disgusting buggeritos [paint blobs] into tinier flying skyserpents that gaily decorate the canvas on the walls."

As his four-word verbal self-portrait below suggests, the protagonist is a Mexican-American painter. A working-class convenience store clerk and a son of college-educated intellectuals, Pablo Cortez embodies, in thought and deed and DNA, both colonial oppressor and disenfranchised oppressed, as surely as his name yokes radical artist with invading conquistador. "El supermongrel. Un mestizoísimo mental," he becomes the first human to survive contact with an alien race, subverting the science fiction convention of first contact as the uncom-

plicated province of white Anglophonic soldier or scientist or astronaut.

Really, Hogan's entire novel is subversive. Cortez only survives first contact because he's saved by a black woman, the Zulu telepath Willa Shembe. She perishes facilitating his rescue, a casualty that evokes the stereotype of the female beloved dying to restore the hero to sexual freedom—yet she sabotages the stereotype, because she simultaneously is and isn't dead, making it possible that Cortez will never be alone again. His sexual adventures suggest het-male fantasies (while he doesn't sleep with every adult female, one of his early brushes with death is rewarded by "the girls [in the guerrilla art collective] all kiss[ing] me—hell, Maria even slipped me a little tongue and I was sure she was a confirmed lesbo"). Yet Cortez's behavior is transgressive when viewed in racial terms, whereas that of the rich, white, hetero-BDSM-daddy lead of the mondo-bondo blockbuster *50 Shades of Grey* reinforces American sexual norms. After all, potent, sexually irresistible protagonists are "supposed" to be powerful white men.

The author's most fundamental subversion is in the language itself. It's true that slangy, dense, not-immediately-accessible language, packed with eyeball-kicking neologisms and non-English words is a cyberpunk specialty. However, loanwords from a First-World power like Japan don't begin to pack the seditious punch of the language of America's own disenfranchised, and Hogan doesn't stop with Spanglish. Cortez's dialogue and narration also incorporate elements of working-class speech, African American culture, and the Aztec language. Here, he describes his preparation to meet the Jovian aliens: "I was stripped naked; like



a handsome young Aztec boy, who, after being chosen by the priests to be the impersonator, imitator, actor to play the part of Tezcatlipoca—that’s Smoking Mirror in Nahuatl—the wizard/trickster god who whispers those bad, bad, badissimo ideas into your ear and makes you do those things you don’t really want to do and just know ain’t right.” And how does he describe the experts’ account of his survival? “None of the scientists could agree about just what the chingada was going on. Yeah, they had all kinds of loco theories about it all: it was all me being wackísimo, a crazy artist, crazy minority boy, crazy misunderstood misfit; it was a breakthrough into some nuevofangled

cyber-psychoautonomelectromagnetic-neuro-extra-sensory-whatchamacallit; it wasn’t certain, they needed more data; it was all sci-fi televoodooizing.” Awesome!

I could go on and on, trying to capture *Cortex on Jupiter* in a word. Revolutionary? Gonzo? Well-written? Nahuatlfuturist? Anarchic? *Recombo-cultural*? Satirical? Cutting-edge? All are accurate (yes, even “cutting-edge,” though the book was first published 25 years ago). But I’ll let Cyrano de Bergerac have the last word with his favorite, because it’s the word that comes most often to my mind: Panache.

Hogan doesn’t stop with Spanglish. Cortex’s dialogue and narration also incorporate elements of working-class speech, African American culture, and the Aztec language.

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

Of Aliens, Lovers, and Others (cont. from p. 11)

And sadly, no research-Dalek is an island. Because the culture that birthed her is rendered with so little depth and nuance, Natalie’s own alienness comes across as shallow. As a consequence of that, her development as a caring, responsible, and independent being winds up feeling far too easy. It’s not so much a hard-won victory as it is the slipping on of an extra-comfy sweater.

Still, the marvels of the book’s first two sections are more than enough to counterbalance the irritations of its third—and even that problematic third part is not without its rewards. The book may be a bit less than the sum of its parts, but many of its parts are extraordinary.

Still, the marvels of the book’s first two sections are more than enough to counterbalance the irritations of its third—and even that problematic third part is not without its rewards.

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



Small, Ugly Utopias

The Grasshopper's Child, by Gwyneth Jones, T Joy Books, February 15, 2015, 315 pp., \$14.99.

reviewed by Joel A. Nichols

Gwyneth's Jones's strange novel The Grasshopper's Child is series of against-the-grain juxtapositions...

The language is key to Jones's putting together these disparate worlds. It is clear on its own, even as it uses multiple registers to insinuate, warn, and reassure.

There are many layers of mystery in this book....

The track Jones takes with his story, delivering a neatly packaged tale in intergenerational intrigue straight out of a Wilde farce...reminds the reader that nothing in this novel is as it seems.

"She liked being in a crowd again. It felt safer than being alone in the depths of the country."

Gwyneth's Jones's strange novel *The Grasshopper's Child* is series of against-the-grain juxtapositions: a teenager of color from the city sent to care for two "Elderly Wrecks" whose great house and gardens are rotting around them, a near-future England so grim and violent that only the Chinese Empire's invasion can stop the genocide and cannibalism, gardens that seem to teem with magic but instead let Jones show how internet-native teenagers can get down and dirty with Victorian plumbing technology. There are many more examples of points where the author has reached for the most disparate comparison in any given case and confidently pulled it into this novel in a realistic, ho-hum way. The language is key to Jones's putting together these disparate worlds. It is clear on its own, even as it uses multiple registers to insinuate, warn, and reassure. Writing about Tallis, the "Wreck" to whom teen protagonist Heidi has been given, and who berates her with unpredictable intensity: "You just had to let her swoosh over you, raging but harmless, like a knee-high wave on the beach."

The overall effect is disjointed: is this an updated Nancy Drew, a satire of late technology (complete with holographic social workers and virtual popstar competitions), a refreshing teen friendship and love story that avoids romantic clichés in its desire to do the right thing by these teens, or something else altogether?

There are many layers of mystery in this book, whether the reader is questioning the tragic murder that left Heidi's father dead and her mother imprisoned; the shady conspiracies that infuse every part of life in this too-good-to-be-true rural idyll; or the much smaller scale but no less emotional mystery of what, exactly, the evil Crace is doing to Mrs.

Scott-Ambrose, an elderly person being cared for by another teen.

Indeed, Clancy, this other teen, is a shadowy question himself in the guise of a hooded rebel avoiding authorities and living rough, but possessing a tender heart for Mrs. Scott-Ambrose. The track Jones takes with his story, delivering a neatly packaged tale in intergenerational intrigue straight out of a Wilde farce—not quite babies in carpet bags in the train station, but almost—reminds the reader that nothing in this novel is as it seems. All you as a reader can trust is that Heidi's gut will figure out (mostly) who is good and who is bad, what is safe and what isn't. She isn't the narrator. But if she were, I'd describe this book as having a reliable narrator and a completely unreliable plot in which fantasy-seeming reality (think Jo Walton's *Among Others* with no magic) meets speculative social and political fiction of the grittiest order. Add to all this an almost absurd arrangement of novelistic elements more on the order of Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, or something more recent from Alan DeNiro or Brian Francis Slattery, and you'll have a sense of the book's general feeling.

This near-future England on the mend from neo-Anglo-Saxon butchery and organized blood rites is fascinating, and so lightly drawn by Jones that details come only thread by thread, and still don't add up to a very complete picture. The few details do leave the reader with unmistakable and terrible knowledge about how it must have been. Because *Grasshopper's Child* is set in the world of Jones's *Bold as Love Cycle*, simply sketching its outlines is sufficient for those familiar with that work. It's effective for the rest of us, too: the light touch of her world-building pays off in massive impacts and is not to be ignored: "Nobody had talked about it, it was never on the news, but everyone had known street kids were disappearing; and the home-



less; anyone vulnerable, and anyone who tried to defend them.” Jones flicks a pebble down the hill in the first chapter, and by the end of the book, our very earth is shaking with the boulders crashing around us.

Another review might also critique the author’s mosaic-effect as too disconnected, and my first reactions were that I wanted more: more details about the Chinese invasion and Britain’s assumption into the Empire; a deeper, sustained look at the fascinating life of an elderly blind woman who, eventually, shows herself to be a mastermind spy; a narrative voice that goes inside the other houses, opens its lens wide to take in so much more than what Jones is content to give us, tracing her fingertips on the edges. Or, more centrally, more of Heidi’s story. But the sum total of these meticulous details tells us everything we need to know about the tapestry by describing the threads and suggesting how they weave together, leaving the reader

to assemble the entire, great scene on her own.

While Heidi, the teenaged poet, is at the center of this strange and gorgeous story, there is a riotous cast of other teenagers who are also “Exempt” from joining the forced work in the Agriculture Camps. While most of this group are Exempt because they are in town as indentured elder carers, others are the children of the elites in this tiny “utopia,” and this novel both delivers as a novel for teenagers about their (petty) love affairs and anti-authoritarian adventures while simultaneously subverting the dominant themes in most of the storylines, those that lock girls into tight orbits around romantic entanglements and popularity rankings. Instead, here are a valid and deep friendship between a boy and a girl that does not turn sexual or romantic, and several examples of strong female friendships that survive and thrive even as one or the other gets the boy or doesn’t. These are not at all usual and should be cherished.

...this novel both delivers as a novel for teenagers about their (petty) love affairs and anti-authoritarian adventures while simultaneously subverting the dominant themes in most of the storylines, those that lock girls into tight orbits around romantic entanglements and popularity rankings.

Joel A. Nichols is a writer and librarian who lives in Philadelphia. He has served on the jury of the Stonewall Book Award, published more than 20 short stories, and has also written two nonfiction books for other librarians.

This is How You Teach a Bird to Walk

Anne Carly Abad

clip its wings.

inasmuch as animals suffer
from depression, nip it.

give more worms and crickets than usual
but be careful not to get it fat.

for a few days, let it scamper about
in its newfound flightlessness.

to begin its education, let it watch you pace, slowly
then with a single word or sound, command walk!

for every two steps without attempting flight,
toss in a treat and a gentle stroke on the back,

no more, no less, else the bird get cocky.

any time it tries to bite, withhold food.
when it isn’t training, keep it locked up.

it will know that walking is freedom—

soon enough it will be like a child, and you, a mother.
a cage will no longer be needed.

Anne Carly Abad has recently been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for her poem “The Bitter Gourd’s Fate,” which was published by Niteblade. Her work has appeared or will appear in *NameL3ss Digest*, *Apex*, and *Not One of Us*. Find out more about her at <http://the-sword-that-speaks.blogspot.com>.



Life, Death, and In-Between

Half-Resurrection Blues, by Daniel José Older, Penguin, January 6, 2015, 336 pp., \$7.99.

reviewed by Uzuri Amini

“The weaving of issues is the tapestry of life”—Awo Fanira

In his new book *Half-Resurrection Blues*, Daniel José Older creates a rich fabric made of ghosts and other unseen spirits moving through the night—a fabric it would put us, the living, in shock to see. From the silky and sublime to the raggedy raw edges, we experience and explore life on both sides of death with our guide, “in-betweener” Carlos Delacruz, the novel’s hero.

Delacruz’s is a mysterious life, full of the contrasts he encounters living betwixt and between. He’s not totally dead after being partly resurrected, nor fully alive. And he seems to be one of very few who are like that. Carlos isn’t sure if that is a good thing or not, as there is no one to tell him how he died or anything about his life. He doesn’t know if the streets and diverse cultures he traverses—from the Haitians to the Trinis to the Puerto Ricans—were part of his previous world.

Questions. There are always questions in Delacruz’s world. Not just the personal ones but the ones that are a part of his job as a sort of detective for the New York Council of the Dead. (The Council works to keep a balance between the living and the dead while dealing with issues between those on the dead side.)

Life goes on. Even in death.... Delacruz doesn’t exist in a singular world.

When he needs mothering Mama Esther is there, living in her home, made into a library and healing center. She was important in bringing him back to himself when he died. Her warmth, quiet strength, and years of wisdom provided needed solace and safety during his long convalescence. The round wide folds of her spirit essence protected the entire house and its inhabitants. Now Delacruz knows he can go to her when troubles plague him. He can trust Mama Esther, but not just anyone.

Among the few he *can* trust are Riley, Dro, and Trevor, who also work for the Council. There are times when the four fight together and times they party tighter.

The newest person in Delacruz’s life is Sasha, who claimed his heart when he didn’t expect it. Sasha, with her welcoming arms, is also an in-betweener. She has a secret, too—one which Delacruz holds. One which could end “them.”

The latest threat to the Council of the Dead comes from another in-betweener named Sarco, who is also, it turns out, a sorcerer. Sarco wants to change the balance of power between the living and the dead. His subtle plan, honed over many years, involves the use of disruptive entities known as “ngks.” The sounds ngks make strike disabling fear into their opponents, as in this scene early in the book when Delacruz and his fellow fighters encounter them in a creepy basement:

I open the door slowly, hear nothing, sense nothing from below and sidestep, blade first, down the basement stairs. It’s dark as fuck, but the coward ickiness hangs in the air like a chemical cloud. From out of the emptiness, someone yells, at once terrified and triumphant. The urgent shriek of someone who has absolutely lost his mind.”

From that moment, Delacruz is propelled toward the ultimate encounter with Sarco that is both their destinies. It’s a vivid and compelling destiny, as is clear from this later—but not final—meeting:

It’s raining in the Underworld. A cruel wind has whipped up around us, and it buffets my body: I have to concentrate not to swoop away off the roof. Sarco is exultant—he throws his arms up to the storm and laughs.

From the silky and sublime to the raggedy raw edges, we experience and explore life on both sides of death with our guide...

Delacruz’s is a mysterious life, full of the contrasts he encounters living betwixt and between. He’s not totally dead after being partly resurrected, nor fully alive.

There are always questions in Delacruz’s world. Not just the personal ones but the ones that are a part of his job as a sort of detective for the New York Council of the Dead.



“Can you feel it, Carlos?” It’s a rhetorical question, apparently, because he just keeps laughing instead of waiting for an answer. I can though. The air is pregnant with tension, the way it gets just before a hurricane. “The missing piece!” Sarco yells into the sky.

Half-Resurrection Blues is a splendid tapestry woven with care, bringing together characters who for years were passed by as protagonists in this genre, doing things their normal sidekick status would have kept them from. It takes place in a city filled with the sorts of people who actually live in modern cities. Older’s suspenseful, lively writing is a promising start for this new series featuring intriguing characters; brilliant action; and emotionally, spiritually, and culturally resonant locales.

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Uzuri Amini (Ishe Fa’lona Oshun Iya Oshogbo) is an initiated priest of Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of love, healing and art; as well as a writer, artist, and ceremonialist. She has contributed to several anthologies.

It’s Been Some Time, Now
(for Camilla M. Decarnin)

Terry A. Garey

I envision you as a small plump rock
on an asteroid where the un-corporeal you
is criticizing politically correct orbits,
fusion,
and young suns.

You’ve dug in,
broadcasting your opinions,
guiding comets in their orbits,
and comforting the demoted planet Pluto.

You still quote Joanna Russ,
Samuel R. Delaney, Pat Califia, Susan Wood,
and fall in love
with the theory of gravity
over and over.

It’s a comfort, you out there
chivying the galaxy to strive for greatness,
yet remembering the taste of tomatoes
on sourdough bread,
and how we laughed and laughed,
knowing who the enemy was.

Terry A. Garey, a member of Lady Poetesses from Hell from the Twin Cities, has edited several volumes of poetry and has received two Rhysling awards for her work: for “Spotting UFOs while Canning Tomatoes” (1977) and “The Cat Star” (2013).



The Weight of Forgiveness

Anne Carly Abad

No parent
calls her child ugly

but you did.



They say the bearer and the giver of pain
both carry its weight
for as long as they live.

But forgiveness, once ice, thawed under time's heat,
its waters buoying,
but I can't swim.



Even when I moved out,
there were too many ways
to be hideous:
my droopy eyes, the crooked canine in my cave of a mouth,
the fat folds around my hips
(you did tell me to stop with the cookies);

it was easy to sink.



I smile, we talk, we laugh,
over a cup of bitter coffee,
overbrewed.

It would have felt more real
had my memories of you been written on water.



I return home to a spotless house
and I scrub
every corner, as I often do. I wash down floors
with soapy water, flushing out
imaginary dirt.

Congratulations to CSZ poets

nominated for a 2015 Rhysling Award

Mark Rich ☉ "The Swooning Man" (Vol. 4, No. 4)

Terry A. Garey ☉ "Elephants in the Alley" (Vol. 3, No. 3)



Women as Hunters and Gatherers

Terry A. Garey

Words are gathered like berries,
dropped one by one into pails, baskets, aprons.
Hands are stained with juice, stuck by thorns
as they preserve words like jam, jar by precious jar.

They are forged at night when it's cool and quiet,
after work, while the baby naps, or on the bus.
Early in the morning before anyone else is awake
words get strung, spun, stitched together,
cooked into strings and theories
with pencils, pens, computers, typewriters,
backs of envelopes, invoices, bills, and eviction notices.

Strings become sentences, the paragraphs
turned this way and that, examined for strength,
utility, joy, anger, fear, pain,
then stored in the closet, behind the sink,
back of the drawer at work,
in the glove compartment,
at the bottom of back packs, and in pockets.

Paragraphs are mixed, batched, discarded, redone, dusted,
washed, embroidered comforted, torn, till they are pages,
chanted, whispered, laid out like a veil to be saved
for an eldest daughter.

They are scattered like seeds,
swept into a corner, forgotten,
left in the junk drawer,
then gathered again and sifted
for worth, use, construction,
consumption.

Pages are bundled into chapters,
strong, worthy, sturdy tools:
a good broom,
a typewriter, spade,
washing machine, hammer,
apron, microwave, circular saw,
everything needed to build, sort, tidy,
sanitize, chop, blend, or puree.

All the necessities, gathered,
each book is hammered together,
with mortise and tenon, seam by seam,
berry by berry, drop by drop
into a book like a house:
a shack, tepee, yurt,
apartment, cold water flat,
packing box in the alley,
a palace, beach cabana—
each a home
according to the need
of a woman's heart and mind—
and her words.





I am a child of Harlem; this is where I was born and raised. It is where I taught myself to draw and went to school. After a number of years, in the Bronx for college, in Newark, New Jersey, for law school, the upper west side of Manhattan and St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, for my career, I returned to Harlem, a mere block and a half from the rooming house I grew up in with my parents, two brothers, and a sister.

Harlem has been a part of shaping my character and my art. As a young child I wanted to be an artist; it was my escape, my haven, and my soul. I drew the pictures in comic books, encyclopedias, magazines; and then my family and the people and things in my neighborhood. I wanted to attend New York City's prestigious High School of Music & Art; so I submitted some of my drawings and was accepted for further testing. I walked into the panel of art teachers with a pencil and eraser and was asked to draw a model who was sitting on a chair on top of a table. They supplied paint and brushes, and I was then instructed to paint a picture of a stuffed duck. It seemed like forever until I was called down to my Junior High School Office and told that I was accepted. The three years I spent at Music & Art introduced me to oil paints, watercolors, sculpture, ink, printing, etchings, block cuts, and for the first time, a community of artists.

I read in the local Black newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, that a new museum was to be opened in Harlem, and brimming with the confidence of youth, I took four of my paintings to the curator. They were all accepted and exhibited in Harlem's new *Studio Museum in Harlem* within their first few months in 1968.

I was, however, afraid. Afraid, that as an African American artist I could not make a viable living as a fine artist. I needed to escape the very humble exist-

tence that was our life, so I set off for New York University and then Rutgers University, School of Law. At the conclusion of a successful career in law I returned to my passion, painting, and my early inspiration, Harlem. I also walked into The Art Students League of New York, an institution that has honed the skills of some of this country's finest artist. I had the good fortune to enroll in the painting and life drawing classes of Robert Cenedella, who has helped me to shape and sharpen my ideas and approaches to painting.

My artistic influences are Henri Matisse, Toulouse Lautrec, Paul Cezanne, and Vincent Van Gogh, the artists whose work populated the museums and speech of my teachers. It is through them that I embraced my love of color.

I have loved music, and most significantly jazz, since high school. It is jazz that provides the background when I paint. Music inspires me and sets my mood, whether it is Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, or the more avant-garde such as John Coltrane, Pharaoh Sanders, and Yusef Lateef.

When I look at Harlem I see colors, the colors of the people and the street. I hear and see the colors of the music and the grace and beauty of the movement of my people. I have started a series of paintings titled "Harlem Dance," capturing the movement and spirit of dance.

Art must speak to something for me. There is too much happening in the world for me to allow my art to be a hollow and empty voice. I have seen and lived in poverty and powerlessness and felt the despair and anger of my people, and that is what I seek to paint. Yet I try to let my art speak subtly. I want my messages to reach out to you, but not in an overt way. Instead I hope my paintings are open to many interpretations. This is the mission of my art, to bring Harlem's past and present to life on my canvas.

<http://richardobakerart.com/>





Searching for Nothing



125th Street



Waiting



Woman





On the Street



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