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In Memoriam: Kate Wilhelm (1928-2018) and Gardner Dozois (1947-2018)

by L. Timmel Duchamp

Scott Bradfield begins his *LA Times* "Kate Wilhelm: An Appreciation" (March 13, 2018) with an anecdote that stunned me with the shock of recognition. The anecdote serves, of course, to provide a context for appreciating the work and career of Kate Wilhelm, but also, I think, for situating that of Gardner Dozois, a full generation younger. At age 14, Bradfield witnessed his first Nebula Awards ceremony, in 1970, as an usher. He notes that Gene Wolfe's "The Island of Doctor Death," Kate Wilhelm's "A Cold Dark Night with Snow," and R.A. Lafferty's "Entire and Perfect Chrysolite" were among the nominees for the short story category. Bradfield suggests these three were all writers influenced by the "New Wave," which is to say, writers who "were happily experimenting with the form, style and content of traditional science fiction. In fact, they were so good at these experiments that it was often impossible to tell where one genre ended and another began—or whether genre had any influence on the stories at all." When "No Award" was announced as the winner of the category, Bradfield writes:

> After a pause, several dozen SFWA members stood and began to clap. The applause, continuing for several minutes, came as quite a shock to me. For the first time, I realized that many writers and readers didn't like this strange new fruit appearing in the branches of their familiar old trees—stories that were literary, poetic and journeying far from the tales of interstellar battles and first-contact that had made the "Golden Age" so, well, *golden*. These people didn't want anything to change; what they wanted—and often said they wanted—was escape from the disturbing street-fought conflicts of their country into outer space tales of adventure and romance.

Doesn't this sound familiar? Oddly enough, though I was well-acquainted with the rift that broke out over support for or opposition to the US's war in Vietnam, I hadn't realized that the war within the field over boundaries and borders had been quite that fierce half a century ago. (The positions of writers in the two conflicts might make for an interesting Venn diagram.) When I began reading sf/f in the late 1970s, I took the field's riches as a given. (*The Einstein Intersection* was my introduction to the field, notwithstanding my having read books like *1984* and *The Time Traveller* in my early teens.) Although I soon developed favorites, I began by reading widely and somewhat indiscriminately, and so it didn't occur to me that bitter disputes aimed at keeping certain kinds of writers out were a recurrent aspect of the field's history. Imagine my indignation many years later when I read, in *SF Eye,* an all-out attack on women writers for having emasculated science fiction. Not long after that came the war between the "humanists" and the cyberpunks, which I couldn't really fathom, since I couldn't imagine giving up either. I soon learned that in one form or another, a battle over definitions of the field was nearly always in progress.

It was around then that I began writing short fiction and sending it out. Although two of my earliest sales were to avowedly feminist anthologies, I kept reading everywhere that feminist sf was over. Would there, *could* there, be a place for a writer like me, in the field where I felt I belonged? Kris Rusch bought some my work for Pulphouse. One of my most overtly, in-your-face feminist stories was picked up by Bantam for their premier *Full Spectrum* series. And then Gardner Dozois started reading my submissions, remarking that he'd found my *Full Spectrum* story interesting. He was grumpy with me from the first because he couldn't tell from my cover letter how to address me. Actually, grumpy was his personal style. He was grumpy because just an additional paragraph was needed, which was why, he said, he wasn't returning the ms to me but would like me to mail him just the last page, with the re-

Cont. on p. 2

In Memoriam
(cont. from p. 1)

write. After he'd had to ask for just one more paragraph at the end— a "grace note," as he called it—two or three more times, he got *really* grumpy, telling me that I should know by now to do it without his asking me to. And once he was grumpy that I'd sent him a fantasy story ("The Apprenticeship of Isabetta di Pietro da Cavazzi") that he said he had to take in spite of its being fantasy. Over the decade I sold many stories—all novellas and novelettes, the real-estate hogs of print magazines—to *Asimov's,* stories that I knew lay at the margins of the field but that Gardner nevertheless welcomed.

Traditionally, notable editors in the field made their names by favoring and promoting certain styles and types of narratives. Gardner was almost self-effacing, though, in his unstated effort to represent the field as a whole. Perhaps this began with his editing Year's Best anthologies and his famous annual summaries of the year in sf/f. In any case, his inclusiveness made an enormous difference to my own career as a writer as well as expanded the mainstream's sense of the field.

Kate Wilhelm's work affected me more indirectly, but likely as powerfully. I did not attend any of the workshops she taught, but her indefatigable work as a teacher, particularly her decades of work at the Clarion Writing Workshops, helped set the standard for prose in the field, and her fiction, like that of the women associated with feminist sf of the 1970s, provided me with the models beginning writers need to internalize in order to create intelligible stories (as Samuel R. Delany describes it in his magisterial *About Writing*). I devoured her enormous body of work because it fed my hunger for stories in which ordinary but intelligent, self-respecting women struggled not only for independence and survival but also for what we now call "social justice." When, in the last two decades of her career, she chose to focus most of her creative work in the mystery genre, she gave us an ensemble of characters headed by attorney Barbara Holloway of Eugene, Oregon, who defended clients usually up against the agenda of highly privileged interests.

The roles both of these writers played in the field, although as different as the bodies of fiction they produced, nevertheless contributed to the expansion of the field in new and sometimes surprising directions, a tendency that most writers (except for those who believe the field ought to be restricted in ways it has never actually been) now take for granted, just as they do the demand for polished prose in pro venues, which both of these writers also insisted on. Their influence will be felt, I suspect, for longer even than they will be missed as the remarkable unique individuals they were.

L. Timmel Duchamp's latest novel, *Chercher La Femme*, has just been released by Aqueduct Press.

Change the world… Read!

Roots

by Sara Codair

This place doesn't belong to me. It never has and never will.

Years after my family sold it, I sneak down the road that was once nothing more than a path of sandy ruts cutting through a small batch of scrub pine and thorn bushes. I take my shoes off and let my toes sink into the mud.

I am home.

Veins break through the flesh of my feet, delving deep into the earth. They suck, greedily pulling soul-feeding nutrients from the salty muck.

Even if the land's new "owners" return to their McMansion after a night of aged wine and oysters, demanding in snobby, entitled voices, that I leave, I won't be able to. The police won't be able to make me budge with brute force and handcuffs. I don't imagine they'll shoot me for trespassing, but if they do, I won't mind.

I'll bleed out into marsh; She'll drink me down until She absorbs every drop of my body and soul, and I'm no longer Aster, but Marsh and all the life She harbors.

A lone gull cries out, circling moonlit water. A thousand tiny plops break the surface, followed by a larger splash: a striper chasing a school of minnows to the point where they risk suffocation to avoid getting eaten, only for the gull to swoop down and scoop them up.

The "owners" don't return even though I wish they'd arrive in a rage, not bothering with the police. I hope they'll just put a bullet in my intruding head, ending my suffering, letting me become one with the land. I'll never have the guts to kill myself.

Perhaps it's not that I don't have the courage. Maybe a greater force is keeping me alive. I may have never been able to claim this land, but that doesn't mean this land can't claim me. I lack the will to live, but Earth makes me persist.

Sara Codair lives in a world of words. Writing is like breathing; they can't live without it. Sara teaches and tutors writing at a Northern Essex Community College. They live with a cat named Goose who likes to "edit" their work by deleting entire pages. Their short stories were published in places like *Unnerving Magazine*, *Alternative Truths,* and *Once Upon a Rainbow II*. Their debut novel, P*ower Surge*, will be published by NineStar Press on Oct. 1, 2018. Find Sara online at https://saracodair.com/.

jungle red

by Gwynne Garfinkle

we shine like knife blades
in our glamour gowns
we are here to talk of nonexistent men
and the women
who would take them from us
we scratch and claw each other
with our lacquered nails
for the privilege of living with phantoms
we are the magnificent ones
our mouths slashes of red
we take bites out of each other
with our witty barbs
as we battle for dibs of a beloved blank
(his inaudible voice on the phone
breaking appointments, telling lies)
until, at long last
at the end of the film
I reclaim my invisible prize
see my smile of triumph
as I stride into the arms of nothingness

Gwynne Garfinkle lives in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, *Apex*, *Lackington's*, and *Not One of Us*. Her collection of short fiction and poetry, *People Change*, is forthcoming from Aqueduct Press.

The Shadow of the Peak

by Alexandra Seidel

We were born in the shadow of the peak. The shadow is real. I was never so sure about the peak.

> And they said: Look, there walk the twins like lovers, hand in hand.
> Are they not strange, like foxes almost
> or half-remembered fragments of a dream?
>
> And the fox children simply walked,
> sharp-eared and listening
> but never turning their heads to glare.

Our mother was young; our mother was old; our mother was a middle-aged summer wife with curlish hair of gold. She never told us tales, never sang us songs, but she fed us wine of berries, sweet as cherries on our tongues.

> Hush, there goes the fox-girl with her brother, the fox-boy.
> These two have eyes forged for darkness
> like the shadow of a peak,
> these two have ears grown for listening
> to every tiny squeak.
>
> But hush.
> They are just a boy and a girl,
> looking more or less like any other boy or girl,
> and their hearts are just the same size
> as any other boy-heart or girl-heart
> even if
> they each were hiding a tail in their undergarments.

Sister is more trickster than I. She has it from our mother who has it from her grandmother whose grandmother passed it on as well, and so forth. My fur is only half as red, if that. But I have eyes that see well through shadows because they know shadows like a father's all familiar jawline.

Our mouths are smart, our clothes are old, our feet are bare but barely cold. We roar like lions or like bears, are dreamers really, not that anyone cares.

At least we have each other I tell Sister. Our mother can be like a mountain sometimes, jealous of the loneliness of her highest heights, and shadows are good for hiding, not so good for being found. What could we want with people, she asks, and I am not sure.

> Shhh, good sirs, and shhh, good ladies, and hold your tongues you young'uns!
> Look at those precious two, are they not rare? Shifting shape from fur to skin,
> shifting skin from fox to man? What daring have the gods supplied here,
> and what charm! Oh yes, my dear, they speak, and speak with enchanting
> honeysuckle voice only, but better be polite; the boy roars at times,
> the girl got teeth aplenty, and oh! a fabulous tail of red and snow
> beneath those petticoats of hers! For another coin, dear sir, dear madam
> I will make her show you, step right up!

They'd keep us in cages, keep us in chains, keep us so that one greedy man gains; we are not strangers to entrapment though, no, not we of quickthought and fleetfoot, not we who are moonwrought and can't stay put too long in one damned place, not even a cage of silver made. Try to keep us little man, try to keep us if you can.

For Sister, it was mostly just a dare to see what would happen, to tease out all that could happen. Me, I just like to think that I watched the inevitable unfold, right here from that shadow of a mountain peak that I will never climb. After, I wondered: was that, that act of watching as the knife sank into flesh, was that not so inherently human that it should frighten me? And whenever I contemplate the *yes* to that inside my mind, I feel the peak grow, climb through reality, and rise like moonset in the woods.

Alexandra Seidel is a lover of black coffee, a wearer of black shirts, and a writer of black letters on white paper. Her writing is waiting for you to read it at places like *Mythic Delirium, Lackington's, Strange Horizons*, and others. Connect with Alexa on Facebook (www.facebook.com/alexa.seidel), tweet her @Alexa_Seidel, and read her rabid blog: http://tigerinthematchstickbox.blogspot.com/

The Canonization of Junipero Serra

by Nancy Jane Moore

A loud bell startled Junipero out of deep sleep. He stumbled from his pallet and patted the wall for the response button.

"The Almighty One wants to see you," a tinny voice said.

"What for?"

But he got no response.

He pulled on his friar's robes. Most here did not bother with clothes, but he always covered his body, no matter the temperature. When he opened the door of his cell, a bright pathway glowed before him. He stepped onto it. In moments or an eternity he found himself in the audience chamber.

The Almighty One sat behind a table in a simple wooden chair. Next to the table stood a being dressed all in white, glowing so brightly that the darkest corners of the room were illuminated.

That must be an angel, Junipero thought, for all that the being had dark skin and long straight black hair.

"Junipero," said the One. "The Angel Baltazar has brought us a message. It seems Pope Francis has declared you a saint."

Junipero had never heard of the Angel Baltazar, and he did not recognize the name of the pope—he'd had trouble keeping up. But the name indicated he might be a fellow Franciscan. Then he realized the true import of the words. Sainthood. He'd never been sure the odd things that had happened were miracles, though he knew the church had always appreciated his missionary work and his zeal.

"I am not worthy," he said, because that was the sort of thing one should say, not because he doubted he deserved this honor.

"Indeed. You are not. We are in agreement. But holy decrees cannot be undone. You are heretofore Saint Junipero."

The Angel Baltazar shuddered.

"Then I will be leaving here," Junipero said, feeling a small surge of hope, the first he had allowed himself in the centuries—was it centuries?—he had been in this place.

The Almighty One began to laugh, and the Angel Baltazar smiled. "Leave? Oh no, no, absolutely not. You are mine for eternity, as was decreed from the beginning."

"But the Pope has named me a saint, and the Pope is infallible."

The Almighty One laughed harder.

The Angel Baltazar said, "Nothing about this changes your circumstances. It is a title, nothing more."

"But surely the Pope would not—could not—have made such a declaration without the approval of the Most Omnipotent One."

"True," the angel replied. "The One Who Cannot Be Named allowed this designation. But they issued no reprieve for you. Your massive sins outweigh your so-called miracles."

"But then why do this to me? Is it supposed to give me some satisfaction to know my legacy on Earth belies my current state?"

"Perhaps it is to increase your suffering," the angel said, before disappearing.

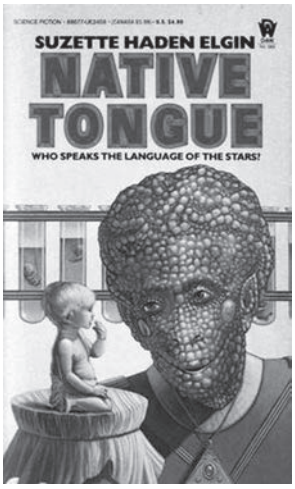
"What you do not understand, Saint Junipero," Lucifer said in a tone that could be called gentle, "is that The All-Knowing One, who, after all, set the Angel of Light to rule over Hell, has a devilish sense of humor."

Nancy Jane Moore is the author of the science fiction novel *The Weave*, several novellas, and numerous short stories. As someone who never fit comfortably into roles traditionally associated with women, she finds herself reading a lot of books on gender.

Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* and Láadan

reviewed by Amy Thomson

The novel Native Tongue *and its sequels…are set in the 23rd century, in a future where the 19th amendment was repealed in 1991; women were stripped of their civil rights and treated as chattel in a conservative nominally Christian theocratic dystopia.* Native Tongue *predates Atwood's* The Handmaid's Tale *by a year.*



Suzette Haden Elgin was first and foremost a linguist. She was also an artist, a musician, a writer and poet, and a tireless advocate for women, especially in terms of women and language. Within SF fandom, she founded the Science Fiction Poetry Association, which has named one of their awards after her. Outside the field of SF she is known for her books on verbal self-defense. She published close on a dozen novels, as well as numerous short stories. Her story "For The Sake of Grace" inspired Joanna Russ's novel *The Two of Them*.

The Native Tongue series and the creation of Láadan are perhaps her greatest single achievement. (Critically, it is impossible to separate the series from the creation of the language, as the two are intimately intertwined.)

The novel *Native Tongue* and its sequels *Judas Rose* and *Earthsong* are set in the 23rd century, in a future where the 19th amendment was repealed in 1991; women were stripped of their civil rights and treated as chattel in a conservative nominally Christian theocratic dystopia. *Native Tongue* predates Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* by a year.

In *Native Tongue*'s future, humanity's wealth depends on trade with numerous alien species. To negotiate with these aliens, Earth uses a clan of linguists as translators. The linguists place their infants in interfaces with aliens for several hours a day to become native speakers of their languages. All linguists, including children, work long hours translating alien languages for treaties and trade negotiations. In response to their social erasure, female linguists have begun crafting a woman's language, one that will express women's perceptions and experiences. *Native Tongue* tells the story of the creation and protection of that language through multiple viewpoints, male and female, linguist and non-linguist.

Elgin created Láadan as part of writing *Native Tongue*. As she herself said:

> In order to write the book [*Native Tongue*], I felt obligated to at least try to construct the language. I'm not an engineer, and when I write about engines I make no attempt to pretend that I know how engines are put together or how they function. But I *am* a linguist, and knowing how languages work is supposed to be my home territory. I didn't feel that I could ethically just fake the woman-language, or just insert a handful of hypothetical words and phrases to represent it. I needed at least the basic grammar and a modest vocabulary, and I needed to experience what such a project would be *like*.

Despite the language's central importance, there is very little Láadan in the book itself. It is talked about, women's lives are sacrificed to protect it, but the language itself is almost a negative space. The novel is centered on the power of a language that expresses women's experience and how that language shapes women's reality. For most of *Native Tongue*, Láadan is a kind of linguistic McGuffin. But at the end of the book, the children are becoming native speakers of Láadan, and it is clear that women's lived experience has changed. This is linguistic SF, and the what-if is this: "What if the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis[1] was true?"

[1] The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that a person's thoughts and actions are determined by the language or languages that person speaks. There is a strong and a weak Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The difference between the two is the extent to which language is believed to shape perceptions.

While the book is fascinating, it has some flaws. First, I find *Native Tongue* a little hard on the male gender. All of the men are of a type: horrid, spoiled, and self-centered. There are no sympathetic male characters. Even the one seemingly kind man ultimately sides with the rest of the men. Also, the book lacks racial diversity and intersectionality. All of the viewpoint characters are white, though linguists from Africa and Asia are mentioned. It is also extremely heteronormative. Women love each other as sisters, or maternally, but there are no sexual relationships between women at all.

What bothers me most of all is that the book posits a future in which women's civil rights are taken away with no fight from the women. Given the current reaction to Trump's presidency, the #MeToo movement, and the long, exhausting fight against the Christian Right, I find this stretches my personal suspenders of disbelief a bit too far. Some of these flaws reflect the author's worldview; born in the '30s, Elgin writes in a way that reflects a pre-intersectional feminism. That said, I believe that *Native Tongue*, like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was written in reaction to the election of Ronald Reagan and the rise of Christian conservatism. Given the parallels between the Reagan era and Trump's presidency, and the current war against women's speech on the internet, *Native Tongue* gains new relevance, despite its faults.

When *Native Tongue* was first published, I devoured it as I did all the feminist SF works of the time. I snatched up Elgin's *A First Dictionary and Grammar of Láadan*, took it home, and studied it. I still have the stacks of Láadan flash cards I made, trying to unravel the grammar and how it expressed the experience of being female. Suzette gave a workshop on Láadan at a convention, and of course I attended it. I remember being puzzled by the evidence morphemes, which are appended to the end of a Láadan sentence to clarify the source of the information in the sentence. In particular, I found myself unable to comprehend "-wa," which means "known to X because perceived by X." Suzette told us that this construction made it impossible to contradict subjective experience.

"If you say, 'I'm cold,' no one can say no you're not," she explained.

I sat up straight, blinking in surprise. "They can't?"

"No, Amy, they can't."

During most of my childhood, my subjective experience had been continually denied. Hearing this was like having the sky crack open, revealing a far wider universe. It was a decade or more before the term gaslighting came into common usage, and I quite simply had no way to express what had happened to me as a child. This epiphany underlined the need for more and better tools to define and explain women's language. It also gave me solid earth beneath my feet after years of searching for a place to stand. It made me a better critic and writer, strengthening my voice by bolstering my belief in myself.

For me, *Native Tongue* and Láadan were the moment the sky opened to new possibility. But what does this creation offer younger generations of feminists? We now have many more ways to describe our experience, so many more options than I did when I was a child or even a newly minted adult. This is due to the work of generations of feminists. Suzette Haden Elgin was a particularly shining example of those feminists. In both her fiction and nonfiction, she strove to teach women to use language to defend themselves and to validate their own experience. No other work of science fiction addresses the intersection of language and feminism in quite the same way. Most of you have been better raised than I was, and you lack my particular traumas, but even so, there are always lacunae, places in need of illumination. Elgin shines a light into those dark places where language falters, showing us the power of finding our own words.

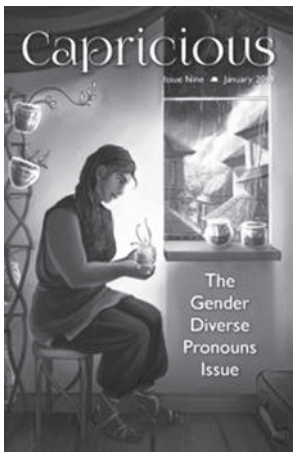
Given the parallels between the Reagan era and Trump's presidency, and the current war against women's speech on the internet, Native Tongue *gains new relevance…..*

In both her fiction and nonfiction, she strove to teach women to use language to defend themselves, and to validate their own experience. No other work of science fiction addresses the intersection of language and feminism in quite the same way.

Amy Thomson is the author of *Storyteller, Through Alien Eyes,* T*he Color of Distance,* and *Virtual Girl*. She won the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer in 1994. She lives in Seattle.

Stories in *Capricious* #9, edited by A.C. Buchanan

by Karen Burnham



Capricious is a magazine new to me, but based on this special crowdfunded issue on gender diverse pronouns, I'll definitely be returning to it. These stories allow their characters and narrators to be comfortable in their own skins—to be themselves without having to shoehorn into a language that doesn't fit. I also appreciate one aspect editor of A.C. Buchanan's reasoning for why such an issue is worth doing right now:

> A complaint that often occurs is that people aren't used to pronoun sets other than he/him/his and she/her and it's hard to learn them...the answer is to normalize them. To use them in conversation, yes, but also in our stories, in fiction, in all media. In stories about spaceships and about magic, heroism and exploration, families and home.

These stories allow their characters and narrators to be comfortable in their own skins—to be themselves without having to shoehorn into a language that doesn't fit.

I'm one of those readers. I have a number of friends for whom "he" and "she" pronouns aren't correct, and I support all of them. But when I'm reading, it's an extra effort to remind myself that a construction that reads oddly is in fact grammatically correct and to stop myself from trying to "translate" from a singular "they" (for example) to a more familiar gendered construction in my mind. An issue such as this, 243 pages including ten fun and moving stories, author interviews, and editorial comments, helps us move through the new (and some quite old) constructions with more fluency and comfort.

The table of contents starts and ends with humor, often a great way to ease people into possibly uncomfortable territory. Lead story "Ad Astra per Aspera" by Nino Cipri has a great opening line: "I'm pretty sure I lost my gender in Kansas." It continues completely tongue in cheek, imagining the "Lost" signs that could be posted in truck stops, mentioning how easy it is to lose things, and wondering who might be picking it up and trying it on. The story could have wound up feeling overly defensive, but there's just the right amount of snark and introspection to make it a great introduction to how gender is going to be treated here. At the end of the issue, "Glitter and Leaf Litter" by Rae White features a pair of teenagers exploring an abandoned mansion and talking with various ghosts who once lived there. One is the ghost of a teen who was never allowed to break out of the strict gender role their parents had in mind for them, haunting a portrait they were forced to sit for. Em (they/their) and Kai (still thinking about pronouns) start bringing things for the ghost to use to change their look in the portrait—"We walk into the bedroom armed with a variety of potentially helpful items: a butch muscle vest, a pair of frayed shorts and some scissors."—to let them be free to play around and find the gender expression that's right for them. It's a small thing, but a story about genderqueer teens helping each other is just the right grace note for the issue.

Another fun problem-solving duo features in "Volatile Patterns" by Bogi Takács. In a universe where magic is real (or is at least a form of highly developed technology), a foreign political leader wears an outfit that was gifted to her by an offworlder. Fashion being what it is, knockoffs begin appearing on her planet, but the magic woven into the patterns is uncontrolled when made by people who don't understand what they're doing. Renai, the narrator, travels with life-partner Mirun (who uses e/eir pronouns) to investigate reports of strange things. I appreciated the fact that they are parents and explicitly have arrangements for the care of their daughter while they go out on assignment. As the chaos escalates,

Renai and Mirun have their hands full being superheroes and saving the day from ignorant cultural appropriation literally run amok. Another satisfying story, and I would happily read more of this pair's adventures—it's implied at the beginning of the story that they've been quite busy.

"Walking the Wall of Papered Peaces" by Penny Stirling is a story about forming a family when the individuals doing so are as deeply different as they are deeply in love. Florence (she/her) is asexual; Hilary (ze/hir) is quite sexually active. Although betrothed, Florence has left Hilary behind to journey to the wall where individuals can find their heart's peace wrapped up in a paper origami animal. But in a wall covered with millions of such animals, how can you find yours? Throughout Florence's and then Hilary's quest we learn their backstory and all the ways they have both made and unmade their relationship. All of their emotions about each other—How can this work? How could it ever not work?—all the self-doubt and anger and passion, all of it feels completely true and real and lived.

Another story involving romance, "Island, Ocean" by Lauren E. Mitchell, tells of a lighthouse keeper (she/her) who falls in love with a merfolk (they/their). This is the first, but not the last, time that nonstandard pronouns are used to describe a nonhuman character, to emphasize how wrong it is to map our gendered words onto a being who has no relationship to our assumed binary sexual biology. The same is true in "Grow Green" by Rem Wigmore, where Jeb (ey/eir) is befriended by a faery (preer/prin) in a hidden garden. If some of these stories were standalones, there might be a risk of Othering real-world people who also don't identify with the gender binary, but the great thing about having a collection of stories with so many perspectives in one place is that you never feel like a particular trope is being forced to be "all this" or "all that." In some cases non-binary pronouns are right for merfolk, or aliens, or the fae. In others they are right for me, or for you, or for your lover, or for one individual at different times in their life.

Perhaps the best example of that comes at the midpoint of the issue in "Phaser," by Cameron Van Sant. Elizabeth is a teenage girl who, having just come out as lesbian to her mother and promptly been grounded for life, gets abducted by aliens. But these aliens (about whom we learn little) can travel through time as well as space. Elizabeth meets versions of herself from different points in her future, the rest of whom have been in the spaceship before. The banter between them is great—they each have their own perspectives on their life, and it's no surprise that Elizabeth can barely wrap her head around her middle-aged self. That would be true of just about anyone, but more so when 16-year-old lesbian Elizabeth, 21-year-old genderqueer Z, 32-year-old male Dennis, and 65-year-old agender Zabeth are all together in one room. They are all committed to their own choices at their moments, but also seeing the obvious evidence that the choices they make won't be permanent. They work through some common themes of LGBTQ life: Elizabeth doesn't want anything that will substantiate her mom's claim that she's just going through a "phase" (hence the pun of the title), Dennis worries that if he isn't seen to be perfectly happy people will say he transitioned "for no reason." It packs a lot of gender fluidity into very few pages, but there's enough humor and charm to keep it moving well.

"Incubus" by Hazel Gold is another explicitly science fiction story, one that asks about all those ships referred to as "she" and what happens when the AI associated with one of those ships decides that "she" isn't the right fit. No dramatics or pyrotechnics here, just a statement that AIs are people too. Especially in a world where biology and identity are so divorced that the thought of bearing children in biological wombs is practically repugnant, identity should be more a choice than an assignment for any sentient being. In "The Thing with Feathers" by SL Byrne, Sev (ze/zir) travels to confront the dragon Vartak after zir village offered up zir lover (she/her) to the dragon as tribute. Vartak is the last of his kind, towards the end of his life, and realizes that Sev might be the best chance

If some of these stories were standalones, there might be a risk of Othering real-world people who also don't identify with the gender binary, but the great thing about having a collection of stories with so many perspectives in one place is that you never feel like a particular trope is being forced to be "all this" or "all that."

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Cont. on p. 10

to renew his species. He shows Sev to the heart of the mountain where Vartak laid her eggs in a different (and differently gendered) phase of her life. They've been incubating many long years in a deep down hot spring, and Vartak draws Sev there to take them back to the outside world to hatch, to fly. Sev has many conflicting thoughts, but what hatches out in the end is surprising.

"The Thing with Feathers" is followed, as are many of the stories here, by a brief author interview. These are uniformly illuminating; in this case Byrne is a science writer and editor who explains some of the biological inspiration from our own world that informs Vartak and its lifecycle. Gender is nowhere near as biologically immutable as many of us are taught. One thing I love about the interviews is that each author is asked to recommend a short story and a novel to the readers, a great way to spread the word about other works out there on the same themes. A short "Further Reading" list at the end of the issue does the same, although it's focused on works from the last few years.

My favorite story of the issue has to be "Sandals Full of Rainwater" by A.E. Prevost. Piscrandiol is a traveler from a very dry land where gender is not marked and everyone uses "they." They are following in the footsteps of a cousin to a very wet city, but connections are missed and they wind up offering to share space with a large-ish family that we would identify as polyamorous. Piscrandiol suffers terribly with the language, which has something like 45 different pronouns depending on the perceptions of the speaker about themselves and the person they're speaking to/about. Prevost mercifully doesn't lay out the entire system; it would overwhelm the story. Instead we're left to sympathize with Piscrandiol's continuing confusion. They join the family, first out of convenience and then out of love, but are constantly frustrated by attempts to find work and also by being constantly Othered in a culture that doesn't understand their lack of identifiable gender and tries to shoehorn them into a structure that doesn't fit. It's a classic immigrant story and very moving in the way that the family members native to the city's society and language try to help, but sometimes accidentally hurt, the person trying to fit in without losing themselves. One thing I found fascinating in the author interview is that Prevost is a linguist. In choosing the pronouns to go along with the culture in the story, they "went back to Old English and got some inspiration there. Anglo-Saxon had three genders and multiple grammatical cases, so there was a lot of material to work with!"

Looking backward and looking forward gives the readers, the writers, and the characters space to explore ways of being that may currently feel constrained or alienating. Things have been very different before and will be again, and as SL Byrne reminds us, not even nature is immutable. For anyone looking for the classic speculative fictional thrill wherein reading a story can change the way we think about our world, there is plenty of intellectual delight to be found here. Those working through their own sense and senses of identities may find some comfort here, some suggestions, some hope. All that together with adventure, romance, and humor—this is a strong magazine issue that I hope will get plenty of attention.

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For anyone looking for the classic speculative fictional thrill wherein reading a story can change the way we think about our world, there is plenty of intellectual delight to be found here.

Karen Burnham is vocationally an electromagnetics engineer and avocationally a book reviewer and critic. She writes for *Locus Magazine* online and other venues. Her single author study *Greg Egan* is available from University of Illinois Press. She works in the automotive industry in Michigan, where she lives with her family.

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All that Glitters: Beowulf Revisited

The Mere Wife, by Maria Dahvana Headley, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, July 2018, 320 pp., $27.00.

reviewed by Kathleen Alcalá

This is a story about monsters, and mirrors, and revenge. It is about our expectations, and what we will do if we do not get them. It is about seeing the enemy all around you, sometimes being right about that, and sometimes not.

First of all, it's no secret that this is a retelling of Beowulf, a long poem in Old English, essentially the beginning of English literature. This is not a story in my cultural tradition, although I recognize it, so I had to look it up to learn the specifics.

Oh my.

This is a story about monsters, and mirrors, and revenge. It is about our expectations, and what we will do if we do not get them. It is about seeing the enemy all around you, sometimes being right about that, and sometimes not. It is about the suffering of the innocent and the aftermath of war.

Maria Dahvana Headley is the *New York Times* Best-selling author of the young adult fantasy novels *Magonia* and *Aerie*, the dark fantasy/alt-history novel *Queen of Kings*, and is probably best-known for her memoir *The Year of Yes*. With Neil Gaiman, she edited the anthology *Unnatural Creatures*, benefitting 826DC. With Kat Howard, she authored the novella "The End of the Sentence," one of NPR's Best Books of 2014. She is also an essayist and screenwriter.

The book is told primarily from the POV of Grendel's (or Gren's) mother. Oh yeah. Dana Mills, the mother in this version, is a veteran of an unnamed war in the Middle East, taken captive, given up as dead, and treated as a war criminal when she returns. She's also six months pregnant.

Desperate to give birth in a safe place, she goes AWOL and returns to the mountain where she grew up. There, she finds the town displaced by a gated glass suburb, Herot Hall, so she goes into a secret place she remembers nearby, an opening in the mountain, to give birth and recover.

Only, she doesn't quite recover. Suffering from PTSD and convinced that her child will be harmed if she ventures out, Dana Mills raises her son inside the mountain until that inevitable moment when he asks, why? Hardened and self-sufficient from living off the land, he has already ventured out and, in one of the glass houses, encountered his twin, his soul-mate, Dylan.

Willa Herot is raising Dylan in the deadly white community of Herot Hall. Dylan is named, without consulting his mother, after the patriarch of Herot Hall. A tall, heavily medicated blonde, Willa is the blank sheet upon which men and her mother imprint their wills. Her last names change for each chapter of her life. Her mother and the chorus of women-of-a-certain-age in Herot Hall form an especially nasty group of self-described "soldiers" determined to guard their world from the sort of change that would admit people like Dana and her son.

Meanwhile, Willa knows there is a monster on the mountain—she has seen the claw marks in her own house. So the riddles are where is it, what is it, and why does Dylan have an imaginary friend named Gren?

When Ben Woolf (Beowulf) came on the scene as the police chief, I was initially a bit disappointed with him—too unintelligent to be a worthy foe for Dana Mills, and as seemingly pliable as Willa. He beds Willa almost immediately after the death of her husband, and together they rise to dominate the cultural and business interests of Herot Hall. Only Headley had me fooled. She understands how repetitive killing can dull and obscure any sense of morality and how that, combined with the quest for honor and a series of lies, could make Ben Woolf into a deadly, if not worthy, foe. Part of his danger is his lack of attachment to the land, any land: he's an orphan. The military made him what he

is, a man who needs monsters to justify his existence. No monsters, no heroes.

Daringly, Headley uses numerous POVs to tell this story, creeping close enough to each of the characters for us to hear what's in their heads. There are not one, but two Greek choruses to add range and meaning to the events on the mountain: the deadly women and the *animas* of the mountain, there to guard their own secrets. These secrets have blended with those of Dana Mills' ancestors, their cemetery bull-dozed and reduced to a collection of "artifacts" recovered from the site by developers, including Willa (now) Woolf. A welcome bit of levity is introduced in a chapter told from the POV of the search dogs set out upon the mountain. The dogs are deadly, but also funny, in an interesting juxtaposition.

At the heart of this book is the mere—a body of water that flows both inside and outside the mountain, forming a picturesque lake that hides much of the violence and suffering of the landscape's history. By calling this book *The Mere Wife*, Headley introduces a double entendre—a woman who is wed to the mere, or a woman who one might underestimate because she's married to a supposedly central male figure. Both women are mere wives, reflections of each other.

There are so many references to various myths and legends that I hesitate to call them out. Count them. But they remind me that retellings serve the purposes of the teller. Listen! the text cries out. Pay attention! Because this is a story not for the 1100s but for now, when we gladly turn our well-being over to those who depend on strong arms without the balance of strong minds and hearts.

"Everyone might be a monster beneath their skin, me included," says Dana Mills. She has never thought of herself as a monster. She has never thought of her son as a monster, just as her child. And she will do what it takes to keep him alive. The first word of the original Beowulf, "Whaet," has been interpreted half a dozen ways. Usually as Listen! But it might also mean pay attention, attend, what ho! Meanings get lost along the way, but Headley zeroes in on a mother's love for her son, something time and language cannot alter. She also points out the inevitable betrayal—that if we do a good job raising our sons, they will leave us to love others.

"All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well," she tells Gren as their life together begins to collapse. Turns out these are the words of Julian of Norwich, a Christian mystic and the first woman to write a book in English, around 1395. Mother and son add their own verses to form a prayer for survival.

The Mere Wife's arc of time is unusually long for a book that reads like a thriller. As in the original, which has been translated by both Seamus Heaney and J.R.R. Tolkien (and probably many others), Beowulf and Grendel's mother take a while to settle accounts. But Headley's divergences and additions, descriptions of glittering scenery and bloody battles, keep us as entranced as those who once gathered round the fire to hear of heroic deeds and shudder at the monsters among us.

Listen! the text cries out. Pay attention! Because this is a story not for the 1100s but for now, when we gladly turn our well-being over to those who depend on strong arms without the balance of strong minds and hearts.

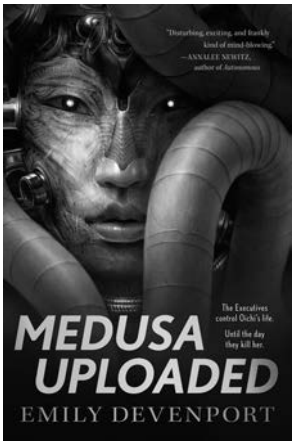
Kathleen Alcalá is the author if six books. She writes, teaches creative writing, and lives in the Northwest. More at www.kathleenalcala.com

"All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well," she tells Gren as their life together begins to collapse.…
Mother and son add their own verses to form a prayer for survival.

Ungraspable Worm

Medusa Uploaded, by Emily Devenport, Tor, May 2018, 320 pp., $16.99.

reviewed by Phoebe Salzman-Cohen



This novel stars, and is narrated by, Oichi Angelis, who is a member of the underclass (a "worm") on the generation ship *Olympia*. Oichi is shot out of an airlock as punishment for her insurgent activities, which means that, as far as the ship's record is concerned, Oichi is dead. However, Oichi is saved by a sentient AI, known as a Medusa unit, which is hidden outside the ship. The two create a bond when the Medusa gives Oichi access to her (the AI's) network of information—this is the "upload" of the title—and when Oichi names the unit, simply calling her "Medusa." Their connection allows Oichi to continue her activities: trying to make her late father's music database accessible to everyone (including fellow "worms"), infiltrating the upper class, assassinating those who deserve it and impersonating others, and, eventually, uncovering deep-seated mysteries about the nature of the ship and its AI units. The book also details Oichi's own relationships with the people she is trying to help and the people who are trying to thwart her.

I found Medusa Uploaded *to be a frustrating read, and a slippery one; I never discovered a way to grab onto the story and stay with it, and once I finished reading it, it didn't stay with me. Its goals, I think, are admirable.*

I found *Medusa Uploaded* to be a frustrating read, and a slippery one; I never discovered a way to grab onto the story and stay with it, and once I finished reading it, it didn't stay with me. Its goals, I think, are admirable. Oichi is a person in a horrific situation who uses ingenuity and perseverance in an effort to achieve what she considers to be justice. But the idea of an oppressive overclass, a subjugated underclass, and a generation ship doesn't automatically provide enough material to make an engaging story, or a story with complicated ideas in it. While I was reading I found myself constantly thinking about Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, another relatively recent novel about a generation ship that is founded upon systematically oppressing many of its passengers. In *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, the characters' difficulties, both internal and external, are explored and contextualized in ways that develop not only the workings of the generation ship itself, but the anguish, ingenuity, and particular mental idiosyncrasies of each character. *Medusa Uploaded* has interesting characters and a promising setting, but the details don't develop enough to influence each *other*, to create depth through context.

It seems to me that Medusa Uploaded *tries to produce a sense of history through implication and atmosphere, but the different pieces we see don't cohere enough to hint at what that history means.*

It seems to me that *Medusa Uploaded* tries to produce a sense of history through implication and atmosphere, but the different pieces we see don't cohere enough to hint at what that history means. The novel contains a wide mix of different given names and surnames, but certain ethnic backgrounds hold greater prominence than others (particularly Anglo-American and Japanese). This would be fine if there was a reason for it that became clear somewhere in the novel—or even if there was a subtle hint that there might be a reason, even one that the characters wouldn't understand. If there is a hint like that, though, I didn't spot it, and this particular issue extends to more than just names. Why are some ethnic backgrounds also represented in music, movies, and aesthetics more than others, and is that supposed to suggest something about who made the generation ships and what Earth might have been like before they launched? Why are certain movies and pieces of music highlighted above others, and is there a logic behind their choice aside from what they might mean to us, as readers, in this particular moment? Not only does the book not bring these questions together in a compelling direction, but it also does not seem to care one way or another if readers ask them. Some characters do ask questions about "The Homeworld," the

falsified origin planet that, according to the upper class, is where the ship originates from, but those questions never relate to the implied questions that the world raises.

It may be that this is a gripe too far, but the fact that the only media, as well as the only slang, cited in this book happens to be from the early 21st century or earlier is particularly frustrating. It could mean something specific about the nature of the generation ships and when they were built, but again, the novel doesn't offer enough concrete information. It is far more concerned with detailing Oichi's various exploits, which, even though they are often entertaining and exciting on their own, frequently feel difficult to put into context with the rest of the novel.

The slang itself is another problem—where does it come from? How is it used? Sometimes the slang feels too close to our particular moment, and at other times it feels painfully dated. Oichi says things like "What a pain in the butt," but also things like What the blazes!?", which feels like a strange juxtaposition; I'm not sure that anyone with either phrase in their idiolect would also have the other. I want there to be a logic behind this combination, a truth about the nature of the *Olympia* and its companion ship, the *Titania,* which the slang points to. But, again, if the novel is actively grappling with these questions, I couldn't tell.

Many of my issues with the book come back to Oichi herself. This is her story, one which is not only defined by a great deal of personal trauma, but also by her particular way of interacting with *Olympia* and with people on it. Oichi should be compelling. She has a particular mission that shapes her moral code (and not the other way around), a vantage point on her home that few others are privy to, and a really strange AI friend. Yet Oichi never quite feels believable to me—she comes close, but not close enough. It's clear that Oichi may not always have the most accurate impression of herself or her world, but the impressions she does have both obscure the world and obscure her own personality without any clear way out. She is competent at almost everything she tries—and when she is in situations out of her depth, such as impersonating members of high society, she has literal voices in her head telling her what to do. She also begins the book by saying she has few qualms about killing, though she doesn't enjoy it. This makes for an intriguing start, but it doesn't develop into anything more. Oichi continues to be incredibly good at what she does, to escape from one situation and land in another advantageous situation, while never really showing weakness, character growth, or emotion. Part of this is certainly because Oichi, as a worm, has been trained not to display emotion. She mentions several times throughout the book that she and other worms rarely have facial expressions because of how dangerous it is to let the members of the upper class know how they feel. Still, there must be some way, some middle ground, between having Oichi be artificially open and having this representation of her, someone who feels like an idolized vigilante with little internality. Even if she cannot make that internality accessible to the readers, it has to be *there*. If it is there, I couldn't find it, and I think if I had been able to, I would have gotten much more out of *Medusa Uploaded*.

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This seems like a novel where mileage may vary significantly between readers with different tastes and expectations. *Cascadia Subduction Zone* readers who are attracted to generation ship stories, who are particularly interested in stories of righteous revenge, and who like piecing together truths from information doled out by unreliable narrators might find a lot to enjoy here. The story's heart is in the right place, even if that heart isn't always well-expressed.

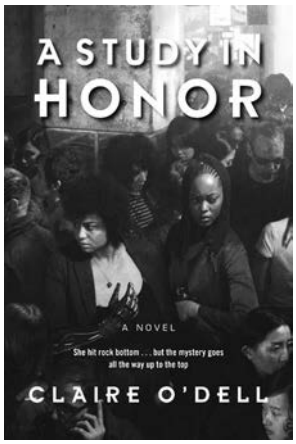
This seems like a novel where mileage may vary significantly between readers with different tastes and expectations.

Phoebe Salzman-Cohen studies fantasy, science fiction, and ancient Greek (with a particular focus on Homer). She spends much of her spare time making strange things up and either writing about them or putting them into roleplaying campaigns.

When Is a Character Not the Character?

A Study in Honor, by Claire O'Dell, Harper Voyager, July 2018, 304 pp., $15.99 ($19.99 Canada).

reviewed by Cynthia Ward



The back cover copy of *A Study in Honor* describes it as a "fresh feminist twist on" Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John H. Watson, which set me to wondering about the history of Holmes and Watson pastiches. I swiftly learned that Sherlock, the most famous character in English literature, inspired dozens of pastiches even before the death of his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930). Since then, variations of the consulting detective and his friend and associate have grown too numerous to count. But, while they've regularly been time-shifted to contemporaneous or future decades, SH/JW pastiches have retained the race, gender, nationality, and sexuality established in the "Canon" (Conan Doyle's official Holmes fiction) until recently.

In discussion with the Sherlockian scholar Resa Haile, I've learned the first non-parodic female Sherlock Holmes in English language literature is probably the character who cross-dresses to pass as male under the name Sherlock Holmes in Margaret Park Bridges' 2011 novel, My Dear Watson.

In discussion with the Sherlockian scholar Resa Haile, I've learned the first non-parodic female Sherlock Holmes in English language literature is probably the bisexual punk ex-cop Sharon Holmes, whose Watson is the American medical student Susan Prendergast, in Guy Davis and Gary Reed's ten-issue alternate-history comic book, *Baker Street* (1989-1992; collected as *Honour Among Punks: The Complete Baker Street Graphic Novel,* 2003). For the first sexually active Holmes, William S. Baring-Gould's biography, *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street: A Life of the World's First Consulting Detective* (1962), posits an affair between Holmes and another Canonical character, the adventuress Irene Adler. The first gay Sherlock (depending on how you interpret the film, and queerness, and the Canonical Holmes) may be in Billy Wilder's film, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970). Per Sherlockian.net, "[t]he first expression in print of the idea that Watson and Holmes were lovers came with the publication of Larry Townsend's *The Sexual Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in 1971" (http://www.sherlockian.net/investigating/compound-a-felony/). In the first black pastiche, Holmes and Watson are modern-day, Harlem-based African American crime-fighters in the comic book title *Watson and Holmes*, launched by New Paradigm Studios in 2013.

The first work in which the famous pair are queer African-American cis women in a dystopic near-future United States must surely be *A Study in Honor* by Claire O'Dell (a transparent pseudonym for award-winning novelist and short story author Beth Bernobich). The first book of a new series (The Janet Watson Chronicles), its title and rough outlines riff on *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), the Conan Doyle multiple-murder mystery that introduced Holmes and Watson to one another and the world.

There's controversy in "flipping" the race, creed, color, gender, or other significant aspect(s) of fan-favorite characters like SH/JW, Dr. Who, and Ms. Marvel, but I enjoy significant alteration when reasonably executed. It isn't always. DC Comics demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of Captain Marvel a.k.a. Shazam!, the sunny superhero aimed at kids, when they insert him into an antiheroic Watchmen-esque comic aimed at adults—an interpretation I can only reject as clueless. But flipping, done well, offers new insight into both a well-known character and the world we inhabit. It also stimulates a pleasurable tension between what is changed and what isn't.

Her post-Trumpian civil-war-torn United States is well developed—and terrifyingly plausible. Her brilliant Holmes and veteran/doctor/narrator Watson are tough, complex, nuanced, engaging characters—like Conan Doyle's brilliant Holmes and veteran/doctor/narrator Watson—and they face a suitably intricate and challenging multiple-murder mystery.

In *A Study in Honor*, O'Dell executes her significant changes thoughtfully, with strong prose and feminist themes. Her post-Trumpian civil-war-torn United States is well developed—and terrifyingly plausible. Her brilliant Holmes and vet-

eran/doctor/narrator Watson are tough, complex, nuanced, engaging characters—like Conan Doyle's brilliant Holmes and veteran/doctor/narrator Watson—and they face a suitably intricate and challenging multiple-murder mystery. I enjoyed this literary novel highly and turned its pages compulsively.

Yet for over 200 pages I experienced no frisson between the changes and the changed, and kept wondering why the leads are named Holmes and Watson.

My reaction puzzled me. The flips were well done. Was my reaction caused by some more subtle change to one or both characters?

Scarred physically and emotionally, Dr. Janet Watson exits the army with a subpar prosthetic arm that leaves the skilled surgeon facing joblessness and homelessness. Then a fellow veteran introduces Watson to Sara Holmes. A beautiful civilian with cyberpunkish enhancements, Holmes claims to need a roommate so she can afford Washington, DC rents—though she clearly comes from money and easily secures a luxury apartment.

Holmes proves a problematical roommate. She helps Watson land employment, but she's abrasive, invasive, secretive, and scarily insightful. She's also highly controlling, to the point of making the roommates' relationship considerably more dysfunctional than that which was obtained between Conan Doyle's Holmes and Watson—an alteration both increasingly popular and off-putting. *A Study in Honor* doesn't commit the infuriating error of making its Watson dimwitted, but its Holmes is a bit simplified and more than a bit puzzling (is she supposed to be on the spectrum? borderline? a neurotypical asshole?), and she sometimes seems to owe less to the Canonical Sherlock Holmes than to Nicola Griffith's lone-wolfish, icy-hot thriller protagonist Aud Torvingen (whom I was wholly unsurprised to see name-checked here).

However, I haven't reacted with such detachment to SH/JW pastiches even more divergent and Holmes interpretations considerably more vexing, so O'Dell's changes didn't explain why her lead characters didn't feel like Holmes and Watson.

Then I reached page 208 of the 294-page proof copy, and O'Dell's leads agreed to work together to solve the multi-death mystery—

—at which point, this reasonably tense and unflaggingly interesting novel rocketed to a whole new, far more exciting level.

Mystery solved.

After decades of familiarity with Holmes and Watson, both pastiches and originals, I finally understand:

> What persuades me Holmes and Watson are Holmes and Watson is—Holmes *and* Watson. To misquote Shakespeare, the relationship's the thing. If it takes the pair hundreds of pages to forge their partnership, I will still enjoy the story when it's skillfully told, as it is here. But I will not accept the leads *as* Holmes and Watson until they're Holmes *and* Watson.

If you share this feeling, you may experience frustration, even estrangement, until the pair finally make that simple yet electrifying agreement. If you don't, you won't. It's not a matter of craft; it's a matter of taste.

Either way, the partnership Dr. Janet Watson and Sara Holmes create is one that will leave you as eager as I to read the sequels to *A Study in Honor*.

I enjoyed this literary novel highly and turned its pages compulsively.

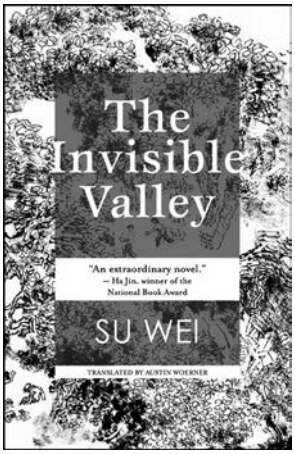
What persuades me Holmes and Watson are Holmes and *Watson is—Holmes and Watson. To misquote Shakespeare, the relationship's the thing. If it takes the pair hundreds of pages to forge their partnership, I will still enjoy the story when it's skillfully told, as it is here. But I will not accept the leads* as *Holmes and Watson until they're Holmes* and *Watson.*

Cynthia Ward has sold stories to *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Nightmare*, and elsewhere. She edited *Lost Trails: Forgotten Tales of the Weird West* Volumes 1-2. With Nisi Shawl, she coauthored *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach*. Aqueduct is publishing her short novels, *The Adventure of the Incognita Countess* and *The Adventure of the Dux Bellorum.*

A Boyish Romp Through the Wild

The Invisible Valley, by Su Wei (translated by Austin Woerner), Small Beer, April 2018, 400 pp., $16.00.

reviewed by Arley Sorg



Lu Beiping is a 21-year-old in China during the Cultural Revolution. He is "one of 20 million young adults the Chinese government uproots and sends far from their homes for agricultural re-education." Translation: he's sent to a work camp in the mountains to perform grueling physical labor, mostly cultivating and tapping rubber trees. He is rebellious enough to be a smart-ass and to feel different from everyone else, but not enough to get in trouble. He also has a discreet, budding romance with a young woman in the camp, the very sort of thing that is frowned upon (and potentially considered "perverse").

Perhaps the most interesting thing is that this is a tale set in an era when the Chinese government is taking deliberate steps to homogenize culture across wide swaths of land….

One evening the camp foreman's family gets Lu drunk and marries him to the foreman's dead daughter in a ceremony called a "ghost marriage." Becoming the foreman's son-in-law gives Lu certain advantages. But soon after the marriage, the foreman sends him to the outskirts of the encampment to work as a cattle herder, a job that seems much easier—at first.

Lu initially enjoys the solitude of being a cattle herder, although the sounds and silences of the night terrify him. He is distraught over the ghost marriage (though intrigued by the possibility of a ghost wife), and upset about being torn away from his love interest. Moreover, the sudden promotion inspires bitter rivalry with the prior cattle herder, Kam, who has been reassigned. Things grow more interesting when Lu stumbles onto an illegal tobacco patch and subsequently encounters Smudge, a naked boy who speaks with "an odd, unplaceable brogue," and who is the child of a polyamorous family of drifters.

Invisible Valley…*draws from a number of cultures, languages, and practices. Doing so allows the reader glimpses at the diversity of a nation that is too often rendered as uniform.*

Okay, caveat time: I don't know much about Chinese literature. There could be aspects of the narrative that I'm missing or don't understand, not having any context but my own. At the same time, I'm betting many potential readers will be coming from a similar place; readers with a deep familiarity of Chinese literary traditions are likely fewer.

Caveat in place, there are a number of elements that stand out as wonderful, while there are a few that make the read a challenge. Perhaps the most interesting thing is that this is a tale set in an era when the Chinese government is taking deliberate steps to homogenize culture across wide swaths of land: eradicating linguistic differences by forcing people to use Mandarin; rendering many kinds of speech illegal and getting people to turn each other in for saying even slightly questionable things; punishing and eliminating religious practices; and much, much more. As a result, stories we encounter in the United States often present China with limited cultural variations. *Invisible Valley*, however, draws from a number of cultures, languages, and practices. Doing so allows the reader glimpses at the diversity of a nation that is too often rendered as uniform. Lu stands as a great set of eyes for this, in that he is originally a city-dweller, and many of the cultural differences he encounters are new and strange to him (ghost marriage and polyamory, for example). Cultural diversity is examined through food, beliefs, stories, and more.

The prose…is strong, descriptive, and often beautiful.

The prose of *Invisible Valley* is strong, descriptive, and often beautiful. Metaphors and imagery such as, "The sun beat down, seething over him, turning his body into a hunk of glowing charcoal, and soon his 'magistrates' cloth was a suit of salt-crusted armor, hardened by wave after wave of drying sweat," create an immersive story full of sensory engagement. Clever lines and interesting turns

of phrases are intellectually engaging in their own right: "When you were around other people, boredom was an accent, a quarter rest in the march of daily life…."

Lu's experiences of the new and the strange challenge him through each stage of the story. He begins as a self-described outsider (despite appearing to be somewhat popular based on his social interactions) who is himself slightly odd and perhaps even "perverted," relatively speaking. He then encounters increasing degrees of "otherness." These encounters evoke reactions, often including prejudice, and his interactions with the strange brings the reader (hopefully) to examine her own equivalent experiences, along with Lu's reflections and growth.

On the downside, *Invisible Valley* is slow on plot, especially through its first third. Most of what happens is driven by chance. Lu comments several times on the nature of chance, in a sense pointing to the nature of the plot: "You can make a joke out of a lot of things, but Chance—No. Chance is no laughing matter." Nonetheless, readers hungry for a strongly plotted tale will have to exercise patience.

The story also employs an unnecessarily complex framing device: a novel penned by the fictional author "Tsung," a grad student who encounters Lu Beiping as an adult during a "routine field survey for a boring research paper," and who bases the entire story loosely on adult Lu's memories (including admittedly dramatizing them). While this device may be meant to create a "this is a true story" kind of feeling, the consequence is that captivating moments are sometimes interrupted for less captivating commentary, in the style of "looking back on this moment years later…." Add to this the fact that the narrative leans heavily on Lu thinking about situations and spending a lot of time exploring his feelings and thoughts, rather than taking action and doing things.

Finally, this is a young man's coming-of-age tale. As such, the boyish immaturity of the main character sometimes comes to the fore, and not always for the better. The narrative occasionally devolves into trite depictions of sexualized womanhood and overwrought prose describing sex ("…he pressed onward into that hidden valley, into the dim otherworld…"). There are troubling moments with regards to gender, especially early on. Arguably, these moments shift when Lu encounters in Jade a woman who is wholly unlike any he's met before; and arguably there may be sly commentaries on gender within Chinese culture(s). Or, perhaps one might say these are "normal" perspectives within the cultural context of the story. And please refer to the caveat above.

All the same, the main character's fascination with female docility (as a recurring descriptor of attractiveness) combined with his almost violent mental outbursts towards his first romantic interest were distracting and uncomfortable for me, especially without overt cues to suggest that these were meant to be questionable. Jade, the polyamorous matriarch of the drifter family, may be an empowered figure who upends many of the standard expectations of gender, especially living on the edge of an increasingly restrictive society (where even heterosexual expressions that we would find "normal" are considered "perverse"). Or she may be a gorgeous "wild woman," an "exotic" sex symbol, an "older woman" (read: 25) who takes control and de-virginizes Lu in the woods, and in taking control makes the experience of sex more acceptable, and in de-virginizing him is reduced to being just another case of male fantasy fulfillment. Or perhaps she is both.

Invisible Valley is complex, thought-provoking, and often funny. Despite a few criticisms, patient readers will find this vivid book to be interesting and unusual. It's full of surprises, lore, mystery, and drama. Importantly, at heart this is a story about people crossing the gulf of each other's strangeness. It's also about survival, coping with trauma, and suffering. It can even be seen as a humanizing polemic against communism, conservatism, and closed-mindedness. It should be read and argued over; it should be shared with friends and colleagues. And like a carefully prepared meal, it's best enjoyed slowly, thoughtfully, and with time to fully savor the experience.

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Arley Sorg lives in Oakland, California and writes in local coffee shops. A 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate, he's an assistant editor at *Locus Magazine.* He's soldering together a novel, has thrown a few short stories into orbit, and hopes to launch more.

Space Babes Change the World

Jeanne Gomoll

These alternate Space Babe drawings spilled out onto my screen over the course of a couple months from late 2017 into 2018. I had designed the Tiptree trademark/mascot—"Space Babe"—back in 1997 as an ironic play on images of women in pulp SF zines of the '50s. But in spite of the mocking tone that had inspired the image, I grew increasingly uncomfortable that this retro-'40s white lady had come to represent the Tiptree Award—an award that increasingly celebrates diverse and gender-fluid explorations of gender in science fiction and fantasy. The award continues to evolve and grow, but Space Babe seemed stuck in an out-of-date vision of women and the future. The irony was wearing thin for me, and I expect others too.

So, I started thinking about enlarging and diversifying the Space Babe family. Frankly, I became obsessed with drawing the new images. I worked several "all-nighters" because I couldn't get an idea out of my head. One night after watching the news, I thought, "POTUS! There needs to be a Space Babe POTUS!" I couldn't help myself. I stumbled back downstairs to my office and started a new drawing. Friends mentioned Space Babes they'd like to see. I made notes, and the images bubbled up in my mind. I would be talking with my partner about some mundane matter and he would realize that I wasn't paying close attention to the conversation. My eyes would wander. "Are you thinking about a new drawing?" Yes, I was. I thought about the Space Babes constantly; I spent hours drawing.

But I didn't know what I would DO with the drawings. I created the first alternate drawing—Space Babe Baker—as the artwork for the cover of the revised cookbook, *The Bakery Men Don't See.* But soon there were a half dozen, and then there were more. Pat Murphy, founding mother and chair of the motherboard worried that if we used them all as t-shirt or mug or tote bag art, we'd simply have too much merchandise. But I had a brainstorm about how to use them ALL—I'd make a coloring book! I didn't realize at the time that we are apparently in the midst of an explosion of interest in coloring books. But I'm happy to see that this has turned out to be a good time to release the *Space Babe Coloring Book*.

So the book came out in time for WisCon 42. From the Introduction:

> The *Space Babe Coloring Book* has 36 pages and 37 diverse representations of that amazing superhero Space Babe, perfect for coloring by wanna-be Space Babes of all ages. The original Space Babe—a kick-ass gal with a raygun—was created decades ago by artist and science fiction fan Jeanne Gomoll. This year, Jeanne realized that the original Space Babe is not alone. And so Jeanne created many Space Babes, all ready to fight for the rights of all. With colored pencils, you can help reimagine the future with images of gender-fluid space babes, young space-babes-in-training, explorers, activists, construction workers, bakers, athletes, intergalactic pirates, a woman POTUS, and other Space Babes of different shapes, ethnicities, jobs, & attitudes. Space Babe is a symbol of the James Tiptree Jr. Award, a literary award presented annually to a work of speculative fiction that explores and expands gender roles. All proceeds go to the Tiptree Award.

Now that the book is in print, that hasn't stopped me from thinking about new drawings. I've got one idea for a dancer, leaping into the air, who sees herself in the mirror as Space Babe in outer space. I suspect that a sequel may be likely!

The Tiptree Award: https://tiptree.org
To buy the *Space Babe Coloring Book*:
www.lulu.com/spotlight/TiptreeAward

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