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EDITOR'S MESSAGE

Appreciation

Chris Pak

SALUTATIONS and welcome to another issue of the *SFRA Review*. This instalment comes amidst a time of change as I prepare to leave the helm to our incoming editor, Sean Guynes-Vishniac, whose first issue will appear shortly after SFRA 2018. I'm excited to see how the *SFRA Review* transforms under Sean's capable guidance, and am proud to have had the opportunity to help steer the publication along its course over the last four years. It's a curious thing, looking back to the first issue that I edited in 2014, to think how the publication that I intended to shape also ended up shaping me. Through my role as editor I've had the opportunity to meet and work with many people who have provided intellectual stimulation, support and friendship. While this is my last issue as editor, I'm looking forward to many more years as a member of the SFRA.

Immediately following this column is a message from our incoming editor. Sean brings a body of experience that promises to energise the *SFRA Review*, and I'm sure you'll all join me in welcoming him at the helm. In the rest of this issue, Marleen S. Barr offers a heartfelt reaction to the news of Ursula K. Le Guin's death in "The Fall of the Tower: One Feminist Science Fiction Reader Responds to Losing Ursula K. Le Guin." In "Silicon-Based Life Forms in Star Trek," Victor Grech and Sinagra Emanuel explore the franchise's fascination with alternative structural foundations for life. And, as always, our regular series of non-fiction, fiction and media reviews complete the issue.

All that remains is for me to offer my warmest thanks: to the EC committees and review editors with whom I've collaborated over the years, past and present, and to my fellow SFRAers who've made editing the *SFRA Review* such a rewarding endeavor.

Magical Thinking

Sean Guynes-Vishniac

IN THEIR TEXTBOOK *This Thing Called Literature*, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle call literature a tool for "magical thinking." I like teaching Bennett and Royle's book in my Intro to Literary Studies course precisely because of its emphasis on the magic, the alchemy of difference, that literary encounters make possible for university students, lay readers, and of course scholars (it also makes for a good defense of why I rarely teach anything "canonical" in my courses). As scholars of science fiction, we have some stake in the "magical" (sorry, Suvinians) thinking made possible by literature, as well as film, television, comics, video games, and other popular narrative forms to which science fiction clings. Through the reviews and essays curated under his tenure as editor of *SFRA Review*, Chris Pak has kept the magic of our field alive, probed the depths of what science fiction studies can offer the humanities, and provided a virtual critical gathering space for SFRA members outside the conferences and more formal academic journals. As the incoming editor, I intend to keep *SFRA Review* a lively locus of SFRA activity. So send us your reviews, send us your essays, and let's build the future of the review together.

A few words about me, so you know what SFRA's getting itself into with this transition. I'm a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at Michigan State University, where I'm writing a dissertation (tentatively) titled *A Future Imperfect: American Science Fiction and the Midcentury Crisis*, which rethinks so-called "golden age" (and especially 1950s) science fiction as a period of anxiety, concern, and crisis over social, political, and historical shifts in the US and the world during the postwar and early Cold War years. This project began with my interest in the Futurians, a group of leftist sf fans and writers that included Asimov, Blish, Knight, Kornbluth, Merrill, Pohl, and Wollheim, among others, in the late 1930s and early 1940s. I also work on the history of fantasy, transmedia franchises, and to a lesser extent comics. I've co-edited *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling* (Amsterdam UP, 2017) and *Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics* (The Ohio State UP, forthcoming).

I'm also the former editorial assistant to *The Journal of Popular Culture* and current book reviews editor of *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*. I'm looking forward to bringing my experience to the *SFRA Review*, to working with the editorial team and SFRA board members, and to producing a review that you will enjoy reading every few months. Qapla'!

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

We Rock!

Keren Omry

CONFERENCES, conferences, conferences! So much of what we do as scholars, students, and researchers seems to begin with or culminate in a conference; a bringing together of people for dialogue. Whether it's within a panel, during the Q&A, or over the drinks that so often follow, I've often found that many of best ideas as well as my warmest acquaintances come from these meetings. I'm just back from one of the biggest American Studies conferences *outside* the US, the European Association of American Studies, hosted this year by the British AAS, where it seems as though more and more scholars from outside the world of sf are twigging onto the fact that, well, frankly, we rock. We've known this all along of course. During this conference, I had the great pleasure not only of joining forces with numerous long-standing SFRAers but of attending an entire array of sf-related panels, often in the guise of a 'regular' panel, a reflective roundtable, even a keynote. These were on video games and virtual environments, science and eco-imaginings, films, novels, superheroes, animals, detectives, afro-futurism, folk music, and on and on and on. It has become very clear that speculation, in the generic sense, has become a primary currency in the exchange of ideas. Obviously, I'm preaching to the choir here but it's a fascinating realization. The EAAS has several networks, among them a women's network and a visual culture & media studies network, and others, which can provide exciting and fruitful avenues of collaboration for our members. These are certainly potential platforms for our European-based contingent to continue spreading the word of sf and worth looking out for. Where possible we'll continue to share information on sf-related conferences and events.

Last time I wrote, the SFRA Awards committees were just wrapping up their deliberations and the conference call was just about to be sent out; Chris Pak, our trusty *SFRA Review* Editor had just decided to step down, and EC elections were far in the future. Since then, our well-deserving award winners have been announced; what looks like a

[#SFRA2018](#)

Gerry Canavan

fabulous conference program is being finalized; a new Editor for the *SFRA Review* has been selected; and we're fast approaching the next elections for two Executive Committee members. As you can see, it's been a very busy quarter! I want to express deepest gratitude and appreciation to the award committee members, the tireless conference organizers, the *SFRA Review* Editor, and my colleagues on the EC. All of these positions are volunteer-work and they demand incredible commitment, dedication, time, and effort. With this in mind, I'd like to encourage our members to consider volunteering for one of the award committees and/or running for one of the two positions coming up for election after the conference: Vice President and Treasurer. We will be sending out more specific information in due course but in the meantime if you have any questions about any one of these positions—or if you're unsure but feel like you want to know a bit more, please do reach out to me or to anyone else on the Executive Committee. We'll be more than happy to convince you! I want to end by warmly congratulating Sean Guynes-Vishniac for being selected to be our incoming *SFRA Review* Editor and wish you luck in the new position!

I look forward to seeing you all in Milwaukee.

ACCEPTANCES ARE OUT for SFRA 18 and additional information will be coming your way over the next few months. We at Marquette are incredibly excited to host the conference and are eagerly looking forward to hosting panels on neo-cyberpunk, race and empire, artificial intelligence, the Singularity, animals and ecology, video games, sex work, William Gibson, Philip K. Dick, and much, much more besides. I can't wait to see you all in Milwaukee! If you can't make it, follow the action at [#SFRA18](#) on Twitter.

In the meantime, we'll be announcing the location for SFRA 2019 and 2020 soon. We'll also be soliciting the slate for the interim elections for vice-president and treasurer; if you are interested in serving on the executive committee in either capacity, please write me or David Higgins for details on the positions and what the work entails. Being the VP of SFRA has been a very positive experience and I'm sorry to see it come to an end.

The [@SFRAnews](#) and Facebook sites continue to promote CFPs and other events of interest to the science fiction studies research community; if you have an event to promote, please send me an email!

Finally, I'd also like to welcome Sean Guynes-Vishniac in his new role as editor of *SFRA Review* and offer a heartfelt thanks and congratulations to Chris Pak for his many years of exemplary, tireless service. Thank you so much Chris!

The Fall of the Tower: One Feminist Science Fiction Reader Responds to Losing Ursula K. Le Guin

Marleen S. Barr

I WAS WATCHING the *PBS News Hour* on January 22 when I suddenly saw a picture of Ursula K. Le Guin appear on the upper left hand corner of my television screen. The thought that such pictures are only shown when people die flashed through my mind. In the split second between the appearance of that picture and anchor Judy Woodruff matter of factly stating that Le Guin had died, I hoped against hope that maybe Le Guin was being pictured to celebrate her latest achievement. When Woodruff said the definitive word ‘died,’ I clenched my fist, shrieked ‘no,’ and thrust my arm toward the television. It was the loudest and most resounding ‘no’ I had ever uttered—what my teacher Leslie Fiedler called *No! In Thunder*.

I have calmly experienced deaths of people close to me as well as the demise of celebrity authors. I want to use this piece to try to understand why my response to Le Guin’s death was so visceral. I generate meaning via my experience as a feminist science fiction scholar steeped in defining interpretation as emerging from within the reader. I refer to the branch of literature and psychology theory called reader response criticism.

Le Guin, born on October 21, 1929, was the only daughter of two anthropologists: Alfred L. Kroeber, an expert on the Native Americans of California, and Theodora Quinn Kroeber, who wrote the acclaimed study of California’s “last wild Indian” *Ishi In Two Worlds*. The Kroeber family spent summers at an old Napa Valley ranch called Kishamish where intellectuals and California Indians gathered. To understand Le Guin’s achievement, it is important to recognize that science fiction’s great doyenne literary lionesses experienced separation from mundane western society during their childhoods, their versions of retreating to Kishamish. Doris Lessing grew up in Southern Rhodesia; James Tiptree Jr. (Alice Sheldon) went on several family trips to central Africa; Margaret Atwood spent much of her childhood in the back woods of northern Quebec with her entomologist father. Le Guin stands out

from this distinguished group because her mother and her father were professionals in the same field. Le Guin grew up surrounded by Ishi’s participation in two worlds. It is this Ishi-centered anthropological interaction which informs the interplanetary cultural constructs in her *Planet of Exile*, *City of Illusions*, *The Word for World Is Forest*, and *The Dispossessed*.

I think Le Guin’s childhood exposure to her mother’s focus upon Ishi is the basis for her astounding ability to think outside the western cultural patriarchal box. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly Ai, an anthropologist emissary, experiences an alternative to gender difference which is affecting to the extent that readers become estranged from scientific gender norm reality. Genly’s observation ‘The King was pregnant’—to my mind the most startling sentence in contemporary literature—does not sound dissonant to readers. Ishi, the last of his kind, might have inspired Le Guin to create society’s only abused child in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” American Indians, who revered nature and did not embrace western technology, could have inspired the ‘churten transilience’—spaceships fueled by telling stories, i.e. by reader response theory—Le Guin described in “The Shobies’ Story.”

I believe that the influence of her professional mother—the anthropological work of Theodora Kroeber—made Le Guin extraordinary. Le Guin, the daughter of an accomplished mother, was the mother of the science fiction community. I think I shrieked ‘no’ when Le Guin died—and merely manifested silent mourning upon the death of other celebrity writers—because Le Guin’s death signified something other and larger than the death of an individual. Le Guin was a pillar of the science fiction community who, like Queen Elizabeth, seemed always to be permanently there to offer direction and stability. I did not respond to Le Guin’s death in terms of the demise of a person. I felt exactly as I did when—as a native New Yorker and an eyewitness to the event—the World Trade Center towers fell down. The death of Le Guin is the loss of science fiction’s rock solid mother, the loss of a towering iconic American literary genius.

I coined the term “textism” to denote discrimination against science fiction. I devoted my professional life to science fiction criticism, a genre which was derided the extent that it was called “crap.” Feminist science fiction was once upon a time seen as being even beyond the pale of crap. Le Guin, creator of the

country called Orsinia, in addition to being part of the pride of literary lions extraordinaire, was loved by us all because, to use the parlance of the moment, she rescued science fiction from being called a "shithole country." When she asked questions such as "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?" the science fiction community heard Le Guin, our pride, articulating the loudest roar emanating from science fiction's pride of literary lions.

Le Guin was a liberator, a Simone de Beauvoir, a Simone Bolivar. In 1994, I wrote (in "*Searoad Chronicles Of Klatsand* as a Pathway Toward New Directions in Feminist Science Fiction: Or, Who's

Afraid of Connecting Ursula Le Guin to Virginia Woolf?" *Foundation*)

that Le Guin is the Virginia Woolf of our time. I now realize that this statement needs revision: Le Guin is the American Shakespeare for all time which the science fiction community bequeaths to the future.

Le Guin's rest is silence. There will be no more new Ursula K. Le Guin stories. We will celebrate the stories she gave us for the rest of human history.

Silicon-Based Life Forms in *Star Trek*

Victor Grech and Sinagra Emanuel

Introduction

LIFE REQUIRES a veritable legion of complex molecules in order to exist. The formation of such molecules necessitates key atoms that bind stably with other atoms in order to form long and complex chains of molecules. The periodic table contains over a hundred different types of elements but only a very few have this requisite property.

The human body is composed of a small handful of different elements, with over 97% of the body composed of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorous, sulfur, calcium, iron, potassium, sodium and zinc.

Carbon is the crux, forming the basis of so-called organic chemistry since this element is arguably the best at forming bonds with the abovementioned elements. In addition, carbon is also capable of easily forming long chains with itself, resulting in long and branching complex molecules with diverse properties. Indeed, no other element is capable of so readily forming large and complex molecules as carbon. This is partly because each carbon atom can bond to four other atoms. Despite these molecules' inherent stability, they are relatively easily rearranged and transformed into different molecules with the help of enzymes. Moreover, carbon is common on Earth and therefore readily available for the chemistry of life.

It is commonly believed that life can only be based on carbon, an assumption that Carl Sagan termed "carbon chauvinism" in 1973 (46), while admitting that carbon is more abundant and therefore a likelier candidate to support life on other planets (47). Victor Stenger has taken this further, questioning our basic assumptions about life by stating that it is "molecular chauvinism" to assume that molecules are required at all for life to occur (Silber).

Science fiction is replete with stories of life based on elements other than carbon, and the most favoured is silicon. This is because silicon is just under carbon in the periodic table and is therefore also theoretically capable of forming complex molecules. Germanium

and tin lie below carbon and silicon on the periodic table but these are correspondingly heavier elements which therefore form weaker bonds with other atoms and are less capable of producing the long and complex molecules that are thought to be required for life.

This article will review the varied depictions of silicon based life in *Star Trek* (ST) and will then discuss the chemical possibilities and properties of such life.

Episodes

Quite early in the ST timeline, it is stated that on an "M class planet. All life forms down there should be carbon-based" and not silicon based (Vejar, "Observer Effect"). "M-class" stands for "Minshara-class, [...] suitable for humanoid life" (Livingston, "Strange New World").

Indeed, in another episode, when the ship engineer claimed that he saw aliens emerging from rocks, it turned out to be a simple hallucination (Livingston, "Strange New World"). A century later, it is still believed, including by the Doctor, that "silicon-based life is physiologically impossible, especially in an oxygen atmosphere." The Science Officer is not as inflexible, speculating "Doctor, [such a] creature can exist for brief periods in [our] atmosphere before returning to its own environment." Shortly after this exchange, the heretofore entrenched viewpoint is overturned with the discovery of the viviparous Horta species (Pevney, "The Devil in the Dark").

The creature is accidentally shot by a phaser and the Captain enjoins the Doctor: "It's wounded. Badly. You've got to help it." The doctor is taken aback "Help that? [...]. You can't be serious. That thing is virtually made out of stone! [...] I'm a doctor, not a bricklayer." The Captain refuses to take no for an answer: "you're a healer. There's a patient. That's an order." Spock is sympathetic to the Doctor, informing the Captain "that this is a silicon-based form of life. Doctor McCoy's medical knowledge will be totally useless." The resourceful Doctor however succeeds:

It won't die. By golly, Jim, I'm beginning to think I can cure a rainy day. [...] I cured it. [...] I had the ship beam down a hundred pounds of [...] thermoconcrete [...] the kind we use to build emergency shelters out of. It's mostly silicon. So I just trowelled it into the wound, and it'll act like a bandage until it heals. Take

a look. It's as good as new.

Silicon based life in ST has been shown to occur in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, ranging from microscopic to huge structures. The smallest life form seen in the series was a silicon-based virus that rather improbably infected members of the Enterprise crew (Vejar, "Observer Effect"). This was of meteoric origin and highly contagious, producing flu-like symptoms of coughing, vomiting, physical pain, sweating, and mental confusion followed by loss of consciousness and death.

An engineered form of life is also depicted: "silicon-based parasites which feed on duranium alloys. [...] We analysed them and found artificial gene sequences. The parasites are synthetic." They were created by the renegade members of an alien generation ship who wish to break it down into smaller parts in order to escape from the main group (Livingston, "The Disease").

The "microbrain" of Velara III was somewhat larger and constituted a sentient and highly intelligent life form. The composition is described as "silicon. Germanium. [...] Transistor material. [...] Gallium arsenide. [...] Cadmium selenide sulfide. [...] Water, impurities, sodium salts. [...] Conductor" thereby further emphasising the alienness of this life. It is described by the Enterprise crew as "very beautiful," an unreciprocated sentiment as the aliens refer to humans as "ugly giant bags of mostly water" (Allen, "Home Soil").

The humanoid Excalbians are depicted as a shapeshifting species, "almost mineral. Like living rock with heavy fore claws" (Daugherty, "The Savage Curtain").

The largest silicon life form in ST is the "crystalline entity," a spaceborne cosmozoan that is able to attain supraluminal velocities (Bowman, "Datalore"). It is described as "a great crystalline entity which feeds on life, insatiably ravenous for the life force found in living forms, capable of stripping all life from an entire world." Since it is a crystalline structure, it is destroyed by a transmission from the Enterprise, which produces a frequency that causes the entire structure to shatter by inducing vibrations through the phenomenon of resonance (Bole "Silicon Avatar").

A silicon lifeform is also mentioned in boast by a Hirogen, a member of a hunting species: "I once tracked a silicon-based lifeform through the

neutronium mantle of a collapsed star" (Eastman, "Prey").

Discussion

Silicon is considered the likeliest substitute for carbon as the base element for life. In 1891, the German astrophysicist Julius Scheiner first speculated that silicon might be a suitable replacement for carbon. James Emerson Reynolds pointed out that the heat stability of silicon compounds may allow life to exist at very high temperatures (Darling 373).

Silicon is abundant in the universe (Crowell) and belongs to the same group of the periodic table of elements as carbon itself. For example, carbon forms alkanes and the silicon analogues are silanes. Carbon can form long chains of alkanes as well as other hydrocarbons based on carbon-carbon bonds. However, it is difficult to prepare and isolate silane analogous to the saturated alkanes with a silicon number greater than 8.

Silicon based chains can form when another element is found in the chain. Examples of this are the silicone compounds in which silicon and oxygen alternate in the backbone of a polymeric material. In fact, silicon-oxygen chains are found in silicone rubbers, glass fibres and quartz and these are all very stable materials.

One feature of life is the passing on of information through DNA. It has been conceived that other compounds might be capable of storing information just as DNA stores information in a chain. One possibility is a mineral that might store information in two dimensions. Crystal growth occurring when new atoms arrive on the crystal surface would be analogous to the initiation of a new organism, carrying information from one generation to the next. However, there is no evidence that minerals pass information on in this manner.

The possibility of life being based on elements other than carbon cannot be totally excluded. However, our knowledge of chemistry suggests that it would exist in an environment which would be hostile to us. Conditions that sustain us would be equally hostile to silicon based life as silanes are pyrophoric and thus undergo spontaneous combustion in air. Therefore the possibility of silane based chains in an oxygen rich atmosphere is low. Silicones are more stable, but are water repellent and water is crucial to life. These incompatibilities make it difficult for carbon based life forms to co-exist with silane based

chains.

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A Sense of Apocalypse: Technology, Textuality, Identity

Virginia Allen

Marcin Mazurek. *A Sense of Apocalypse: Technology, Textuality, Identity. Literary and Cultural Theory*, vol. 40. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2014. Hardback, 138 pages, \$40.95, ISBN-13: 978-3631648124 ISBN-10: 363164812X.

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YOU MAY SAY that Marcin Mazurek's *A Sense of Apocalypse* is a metaphor for the postmodern cultural condition, if you like, and although the first 18 page section of this 138-page text is titled "Introduction: The Argument," instead of argument we get: 'The overall assumption underlying this book is that of a multi-layered paradigmatic change in our thinking of technology (sic), the subject, the relationship between the two, and the ways in which this relationship is represented' (9).

As nearly as I can make sense of it as argument, we are now confronted with 'a new subject,' a post-human subject, for whom 'the body no longer defines human agency' (34). The warrant for this construction appears to be that preindustrial technology was 'mere tools,' a phrase Mazurek repeats several times. The new 'postmodern subject in the context of global circulations of data, invisible electronics and ever-present simulation' thus 'depicted' is 'inscribed' into a 'discourse of identity crisis' (18). The ease and frequency with which Mazurek dismisses pre-industrial technology as 'mere tools,' seemingly exempt from participating in the construction of human identity, strikes me as an unearned claim. The protohuman was not a promising animal in the competition for survival. Barefoot and naked, not particularly well-muscled, nor very large among competitors, the key to its survival was a plastic brain. The ability to adapt to a tool as an extension of the self, to wield it automatically without a drain on conscious attention, was something new in evolution. The club, the sword, the stirrup, the bicycle, the typewriter:

none of these are "mere" tools. To use any of them with skill requires a modification of the brain itself.

One supposes that this 'multi-layered paradigmatic change in our thinking' (9) has come about between pre- and post-industrial technologies because of the nature and/or the strength of the impact of those technologies upon the sensory and psychological experiences of "the subject" (a narrative term to designate the self as represented in a work of art) in a postindustrial society and even that such technologies exert an influence 'upon experience and, by extension, upon the process of identity formation' (9). Mazurek goes from this modest claim to the vague assertion 'the rampant development of electronic technologies and the theoretical reconfiguration of the subject's premises [say what?] ... force us to redefine and re-interpret a large number of discursive claims regarding those ideas which play a formative role in the process of identity construction' (9). 'This' demonstrative pronoun, unleavened by a noun, has apparently wrought 'a pervasive sense of distrust' towards all sorts of things that constitute 'the cornerstones of identity as space, body, locale, relationship with nature, reliability of the sign and, last but definitely not least, the status of the real' (9).

Actually, "this" might explain a lot. The signal intellectual work of our epoch is the pursuit of an understanding of animal, human, and/or machine cognition. We know some things with a fair degree of certainty: for example, biologically normal human beings acquire the language they hear uniformly, without regard to IQ, and without instruction. Our shared understanding of those languages is demonstrable, profoundly systematic, and almost entirely unconscious. Being human, we do make mistakes, and those mistakes can be productive of the understanding we seek. Second, I will point to glossolalia as a well-documented phenomenon found among religious ecstasies and schizophrenics. Pentecostals take it as a criterion of Truth, proof that the speaker has been touched by the Holy Spirit. Absent the Holy Spirit, the habit of producing syntactically well-formed utterances, sentences produced with intentionality but without intelligible semantic content, is treated as pathological. I cannot prove the Holy Spirit is not involved, but absent some compelling counter evidence, whoever would make the claim carries the burden of proof.

Postmodern literary theorists (as bodies and as

subjects) are aptly represented in this catalog of folly by Mazurek's *A Sense of Apocalypse*. Again and again to come across unintelligible prose in the course of our academic work represents a challenge that—to put the matter plainly—requires an explanation. A continuing and often remarked upon problem with postmodern literary theory is its display of verbal gibberish and philosophical naivety. As Gavin Kitching puts it: 'even the very best students who fall under postmodernism's sway produce radically incoherent ideas about language, meaning, truth and reality' (*The Trouble with Theory*, 2008, xi). Alan Sokal famously focused on pomo's confusion between ontology and epistemology. John Searle zeroed in on Derrida's false charge of binary oppositions running riot through philosophy of language, linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, and literary analysis. For me, however, the most troubling aspect of this deeply troubled text is the way in which it implicates science fiction.

Mazurek bases his understanding of sf on a profound misreading of Bruce Sterling's Preface to William Gibson's *Burning Chrome* (1986), demonstrating first Sokal and then Searle's set pieces. He asserts that science fiction is 'liberated from all social and natural law' (32) and takes 'deconstruction of ontological boundaries as the *sine qua non*' of the genre's existence (32). According to him, it is the urge to dissolve such fixed binaries as human/nonhuman, reality/simulacrum, nature/technology that dramatically narrows the gap between sf literature and postmodern theory. He picks up on Joanna Russ's reference to sf as 'a place ancient dualities disappear. Day and night, up and down, "masculine" and "feminine" are purely specific, limited phenomena which have been mythologized by people' (33). Searle would be quite at ease with Russ's statement: '... the distinctions between literal and metaphorical, serious and non-serious, fiction and nonfiction and, yes, even true and false admit of degrees and all apply *more or less*. It is, in short, generally accepted that many, perhaps most, concepts do not have sharp boundaries, and since 1953 we have begun to develop theories to explain why they *cannot*' ("Literary Theory and Its Discontents," *The Emperor ReDressed*, 1995, pp. 166-67).

Mazurek, like Derrida before him, having leapt to an unwarranted conclusion extrapolates upon his mistake about science, extending it to an unwarranted

conclusion about science fiction: 'with its constant emphasis on paradigmatic instability, liberation from all possible social and natural laws [say what?] and, last but definitely not least, appreciation of technology, has anticipated and illustrated most contemporary philosophical issues' and, *mirabile dictu*, 'thus producing a number of reality-concepts seemingly based on non-referential paradigms' (32). Say what again?

A free-wheeling synopsis of the text would put those issues forward, something like this, perhaps:

Identity: a sense of self. Apocalypse: a sense of impending doom. Postmodern literary theory is apocalyptic, a signifier of an essential paradigmatic change. Terminal identity: a metaphor for the human-technological merger. Some part of this change is, somehow, to see the author as an artificially imposed strategy of interpretation; removing the actual writing body from the immediate hypertextual horizon. The reading subject is no longer a passive consumer of a ready-made textual product. A second method of effectively eradicating the author: image addiction is no longer posited as a disease: it has instead become the very condition of existence in postmodern culture. [Say what?]

So I re-read Sterling's Preface, now thirty years hence. These guys, you may recall, were not playing with the net down, and those who teach and theorize the genre shouldn't either. As Sterling concluded way back then: 'we are lean and hungry and not in the best of tempers' (Harper-Collins e-books, 2014, no page numbers). I can't think this book will do much to improve his mood.

Company and Fellowship: Two Views of the Inklings

Bruce A. Beatie

Diana Pavlac Glycer. *Bandersnatch. C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Creative Collaboration of the Inklings*. Illustrated by James A. Owen. Kent, OH: Black Squirrel Books, 2016. Paperback, 224

pages, \$18.95, ISBN 978-1-60635-276-2. Kindle, \$10.99, ASIN B018RB6FNY.

Order option(s): [Paper](#) | [Kindle](#) | [Audio](#)

Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski. *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. Hardcover, 657 pages, \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-374-154097. 2016. Paperback, 656 pages, \$17.00, ISBN 978-0-374-53625-1. Kindle, \$9.99, ASIN B00PF6QL1G.

Order option(s): [Hard](#) | [Paper](#) | [Kindle](#)

IN A REVIEW-ESSAY I wrote for the *SFRA Review* (Winter 2008) titled “Three Perspectives on Tolkien,” the first of the three perspectives was Diana Pavlac Glyer’s *The Company They Keep: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien as Writers in a Community* (Kent State University Press, 2007). When her new book *Bandersnatch* was offered for review, I asked to undertake it. When checking the book’s price on Amazon, I saw a blurb for the Zaleskis’ *Fellowship*, and decided (with the approval of SFRA’s reviews editor) that another review-essay was in order.

I

On the verso of the title page of *Bandersnatch*, a “Publisher’s Note” pointed out, to my surprise, that *Bandersnatch* was ‘abridged and adapted from *The Company They Keep* [...]’ (viii). My comments on *Bandersnatch* will therefore focus mainly on the differences between the two versions of this book.

Company is an expansion to 312 pages of Glyer’s 1993 dissertation. It seems unusual to encounter, as a reviewer, a dissertation-based book published fourteen years after the dissertation was completed, and then revised for a wider audience almost another decade later. Out of curiosity I obtained a copy of the dissertation and, though it is probably less than a quarter the length of *Company*, the argument of the later books was already clearly made, and the use of many chapter subtitles was already entrenched.

The most obvious difference between *Bandersnatch* and *Company* is on the outside. *Company* was issued as a typical university press book in both hardcover (purple cloth binding, title and author on the spine) and trade paperback (decorative front cover, probably the dust-jacket of the hardcover printing).

Bandersnatch is available both on Kindle and as a trade paperback with a James Owen drawing of a dragon on the cover (and, reversed, as frontispiece), and blurbs praising *Company* on the back cover and pages i-iv. Inside, each chapter is preceded by a full-page Owens drawing—all but the last two picture individual Inklings, but the penultimate shows “The Inklings Gathered” in Lewis’s study, and the last is of “Master Samwise in His Study.” Each chapter ends with a boxed comment by the author, each titled “Doing What They Did.” While *Company* has detailed end-notes following each chapter, the “Notes” section in *Bandersnatch* (172–184) simply provides brief source information for quotations.

If we compare the respective contents pages, *Bandersnatch* looks quite different from its source. Though both books have eight numbered chapters (in *Company*, the “Introduction” is not numbered), the *Company* chapter titles are properly scholarly and descriptive: its first four chapters are “Inklings: Building Community,” “Influence: Assessing Impact,” “Resonators: Supporting Progress,” and “Opponents: Issuing Challenge.” The parallel titles in *Bandersnatch* are more allusive than descriptive, suggesting a different argument: “Dusting for Fingerprints,” “An Unexpected Party,” “The Heart of the Company” and “I’ve a good mind to punch your head.” And indeed, the first numbered chapter of *Bandersnatch* is completely new and very personal, focusing on Glyer’s early experience of Tolkien’s and Lewis’s fictions, and includes some of Tolkien’s comments on the publication of *The Hobbit* and the beginnings of *The Lord of the Rings*; it parallels the “Introduction” to *Company*, which is also personal in tone, but different in content.

However, when one compares the subtitles of the chapters in both books, the differences between them almost disappear. In the first chapter of *Company*, for example, they are: “Lewis and Tolkien, 1929,” “Tolkien Shares His Mythology, 1931,” “C. S. Lewis Renews His Faith, 1932,” “Warnie Comes Home,” “The Inklings,” “Guests and Gate-Crashers,” “Charles Williams,” “Ritual and Routine,” and “Tuesdays at the Bird and Baby.” The subtitles of the second chapter of *Bandersnatch* are “Elves and Men,” “True Myth,” “Warnie Comes Home,” “The Inklings,” “Charles Williams,” “Ritual and Routine,” “The Bird and Baby,” and “Famous and Heroic.” Five of the last six subtitles in *Bandersnatch* are identical, and a page-by-page comparison of the texts of the parallel chapters of

the two books shows them as mostly identical.

The subtitles of chapters 3 and 4 in *Bandersnatch* are similarly mostly repetitions of those in chapters 3 and 4 in *Company*, as are the contents; chapter 2 of *Company* (the shortest chapter), in which Glycer introduces the concept of “resonators” borrowed from Karen LeFevre’s 1987 *Invention as a Social Act*, is not repeated in *Bandersnatch*. My only criticism of *Company* in the 2008 review was that the ‘rigid framework’ imposed by LeFevre’s concept ‘led to a substantial amount of repetition and overlap between the chapters [...]’ (7–8). This framework is much less obtrusive in *Bandersnatch*, where LeFevre is quoted only twice (in chapter 7, pp. 151 and 156). Chapters 5–8 of *Bandersnatch* (“Drat that Omnibus!”, “Mystical Caboodle,” “Faces in a Mirror,” and “Leaf Mold and Memories”) show more revision and new material: only four of the twenty-seven subtitles in those four chapters recur.

Bandersnatch’s “Epilogue: Doing What the Inklings Did” echoes the style of the boxed paragraphs at the end of each chapter, but offers instead new comments: a subtitled set of suggested “steps [we] can [...] take to maximize our own efforts to connect and collaborate[.]” (161). They are “Start Small,” “Stay Focused,” “Embrace Difference,” “Start Early and Intervene Often,” “Criticize But Don’t Silence,” “Vary Feedback” (the only section that mentions “resonating” [166, though the index cites p. 165]), “Increase the Channels,” “Try More than Once,” “Think Outside the Group,” and “Taking First Steps.” Each of the subtitled sections ends with a short paragraph headed “Takeaway” (italics in original). While *Bandersnatch* as a whole addresses an audience simply interested in the Inklings, these final suggestions are by implication addressed to fellow writers. Since my readers here are scholars of and writers about SF and fantasy, I would recommend also Sandra J. Lindow’s “Love and Death in the Vorkosiverse. An Interview with Lois McMaster Bujold” (in *Lois McMaster Bujold. Essays on a Modern Master of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 9–15—see my review in *Extrapolation*, January 2015), as well as Bujold’s own afterwords to the early collections of the Vorkosigan novels and the 2007 collection *Lois McMaster Bujold: Dreamweaver’s Dilemma. Short Stories and Essays*. Bujold’s comments on her practice as a writer could well serve as a supplement to Glycer’s suggestions.

Since I summarized Glycer’s argument in *Company*

chapter by chapter in my 2008 review, I will not repeat that summary here. This book is certainly more accessible to a general reader interested in the Inklings as a whole and any of its members individually, and should have a much wider audience than *Company*. As I suggested above, her dependence on the “resonance” concept, while still present, is much reduced. The opening sections of the repeated chapters are mostly more reader-friendly than the original ones, and even in the fully-repeated sections she often makes stylistic changes that improve the accessibility of the text. James Owen’s drawings of the Inklings were, for me at least, more interesting than the photos that seem to recur in most earlier books on the Inklings.

I found it interesting, perhaps surprising, that while the *Company* “Works Cited” list includes some forty-five entries dated 1993 or later, the “Bibliography” of *Bandersnatch* includes only four critical works dated 2007 or later. The *MLA International Bibliography* lists nine publications under the subject “Inklings” published between 2007 and 2013, only one of which is included in her bibliography. It would have been interesting had she considered commenting on Sam McBride’s 2010 article in *Mythlore*, “The Company They Didn’t Keep: Collaborative Women in the Letters of C. S. Lewis.”

The differences between *Company* and *Bandersnatch* are generally positive; she has taken thought for what might appeal to a non-scholar. Bothersome only were the boxed “Doing What They Did” comments closing each chapter; they reminded me too much of the “Reader’s Guide” sort of appendices to many books of fiction and nonfiction aimed at young adults.

II

Since *Company*, *Bandersnatch*, and *Fellowship* all depend to a significant degree on Humphrey Carpenter’s 1977 *Tolkien* and his 1978 *The Inklings*, I found it interesting to compare the backgrounds of the authors. According to the *MLA International Bibliography*, Glycer’s published work has focused almost exclusively on Tolkien and the Inklings. According to their Wikipedia entries, Carol Zaleski is a much-published Professor of World Religions at Smith College, her husband Philip is an author and editor of a number of books on religion and spirituality, and *Fellowship* is their first venture into literary study. Carpenter, on the other hand, ‘was

born, died, and lived practically all of his life in the city of Oxford,' and is widely known not only for a number of literary biographies, but for his studies of literary groups: *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh and His Friends* (1990) and *Geniuses Together: American Writers in Paris in the 1920s* (1988).

Fellowship, as its subtitle suggests, is closer to Carpenter than to Glycer, though its focus on "Literary Lives" is narrower: while both Glycer and Carpenter in their different ways discuss all or most of the twenty possible Inklings (see the *Biographical Notes* in Carpenter), the Zaleskis limit their consideration to four: Tolkien, Lewis, Barfield, and Williams. Yet their study, at 645 pages, is more than double the length of Carpenter's 287 pages. Like both of Glycer's books, *Fellowship* has multiple subtitles in each chapter; Carpenter's thirteen chapters are divided among four untitled "parts." Both Carpenter and the Zaleskis include sections of photographs (sixteen pages in each volume, in Carpenter twenty-three of people, a map, and a manuscript page; in *Fellowship* thirty-three of people, two of buildings). All three versions of Glycer's work argue a thesis, and are so (and similarly) organized.

While Carpenter's book is loosely chronological, *Fellowship* is strictly so. After a general "Prologue: Dabblers in Ink," it begins with a chapter solely on Tolkien's life up to his meeting with Edith, followed by one on Lewis's early life with particular stress on his lifelong friendship with Arthur Greeves. The third chapter goes back to Tolkien (the beginnings of his mythology and his war experiences), and then back to Lewis (Oxford, his wars of battle and faith, and Mrs. Moore). *Fellowship* then introduces us to Owen Barfield (his "Sophianic Revelations," his conversion to Rudolf Steiner, and the proto-Inklings), and back to Tolkien (his marriage, academic career at Leeds and Oxford, and the pre-1930 "Sketch of the Mythology").

After the seventh chapter returns to Lewis's life and activities from 1920–1926 (meeting Tolkien, *The Pilgrims's Regress*), the Zaleskis finally devote two chapters to the real beginnings of the Inklings; though most of the ninth chapter focuses mainly on *The Hobbit*, it does conclude with two sections on Barfield and Lewis. After calling Carpenter's account of a typical Thursday meeting "a patchwork" (196—Carpenter admits it is "imaginary" [137]), they assert that "[the] truth is that Lewis and Tolkien served as twin pillars, elevating the Inklings to greatness ..."

(200). After a chapter introducing us to Williams, the eleventh and twelfth discuss for the first time together the work of all four of the titular Inklings before and during World War II.

The remaining numbered chapters, while generally chronological, alternate between individual authors and "the fellowship"—chapter thirteen on Lewis, fourteen through sixteen on Inklings interactions, seventeen mostly on *The Lord of the Rings*, eighteen and nineteen of the last years of the Inklings. On December 14, 1997, 'when Barfield closed his eyes, the life of the great Inklings came to an end' (505). The "Epilogue: The Recovered Image," without number or subtitles, is something of an elegy. The Zaleskis conclude that "'the dispute over the exact nature of the Inklings—cabal or club?—has faded as history has stepped in with a third alternative: that whatever the Inklings may have been during their most clubbable years, today they constitute a major literary force, a movement of sorts' (509), and that 'the Inklings fulfilled what many find to be a more urgent need: not simply to restore the discarded image, but to refresh it and bring it back to life for the present and future' (512).

The authors said in their "Prologue: Dabblers in Ink" that the four titular Inklings 'make a perfect compass rose of faith: Tolkien the Catholic, Lewis the "mere Christian", Williams the Anglican (and magus), Barfield the esotericist' (12). Given this statement and the fact that none of the authors' many previous publications has been a "literary life" or on a literary subject (even Carol Zaleski's first book, *Otherworld Journeys*, 1988, discusses Christian visions), one expects a strong bias toward the religious lives of their authors. In fact, the book is quite well balanced; the fictions and poetry of these Inklings are treated as extensively and intelligently (and as exhaustively—the book is overlong) as their religious writings and activities. There are occasional odd side-references to religion. About Lewis's Narnia books, the authors note that 'among the non-Christian literary and academic vanguard, Narnia only intensified resentment against its author; that admirers like Brady characterized Lewis as leader of an "Oxford Circle" of evangelizers scarcely helped the situation' (391). About Tolkien's Mount Doom, they point out that 'Tolkien uses the Old English word [Doom] a hundred times in *The Lord of the Rings*, registering its full range of meanings: a fate decreed, a judgment pronounced, a world destroyed'

(417). Discussing “rumors of grace,” they note that ‘Help comes “unlooked-for”—a homely expression Tolkien prefers to abstract theological words like “providence”; “unlooked-for” occurs sixteen times in *The Lord of the Rings*, and with mounting frequency—twice in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, six times in *The Two Towers*, eight times in *The Return of the King* (as well as eight times in *The Silmarillion*, but not at all in *The Hobbit*)’ (421).

The book is well-written, well-documented, and informative, and I found no significant errors or misinterpretations. On the other hand, it offers little that is new, and its length requires patience on the reader’s part. The extensive back matter (512–645) includes “Notes,” (only sources of quotes, as in *Bandersnatch*), “Bibliography,” “Acknowledgments,” “Index,” “Permissions Acknowledgments,” and “A Note about the Authors” (645).

Creating Life from Life: Biotechnology and Science Fiction

Kristen Koopman

Rosalyn W. Berne. *Creating Life from Life: Biotechnology and Science Fiction*. Singapore: Pan Stanford, 2015. Hardcover, 298 pages, \$99.95, ISBN 978-981-4463-58-4.

Order option(s): [Hard](#)

IT WOULD BE an understatement to call *Creating Life from Life: Biotechnology and Science Fiction*, edited by Rosalyn W. Berne, an ambitious experiment. As Berne outlines in her introduction, the volume aims to bring together scientific research in biotechnology and science fiction to highlight the social and moral questions that biotechnology creates. By alternating essays on biotechnology (written by the scientists themselves) with science fiction stories dealing with resonant topics, Berne invokes a dialectic process to be experienced by the reader. The result of this dialectic should be generative questions about biotechnology: about social implications, moral consequences, and normative desires. Like a particle accelerator, Berne collides science and science fiction at high speeds; and like any worthwhile experiment,

the inevitable noise is well worth it for the amount of signal that gets through, no matter how small.

The topics of the essays vary within the broader scope of biotechnology, including obesity, prion diseases, climate change, diabetes, agriculture, cognitive enhancement, and race. The two essays that bookend the collection summarize the history and potential future consequences of biotechnology, respectively. The stories, interspersed throughout the essays, deal more or less directly with the preceding topics. With one exception, the stories are written by different authors than the essays, and many of the stories are written by Berne herself.

The stories succeed in humanizing the issues that are relayed in traditional scientific (and therefore depersonalized) prose and, to me, represent the most interesting aspect of the volume. They are, after all, what keeps this volume from being only a handful of essays summarizing various biotechnological concepts—a book that, while still useful, would have a very different audience. Berne’s desired synthesis is at its most successful when faces and stories are attached to the concepts that remained abstract and sterile in the essays: Eduardo A. Nillni’s essay on obesity, for example, frames it as a problem to be solved, while Berne’s companion story (“Madeline”) paints a stark picture of the dehumanization of obese people. The other stories follow suit, imbuing biotechnology with human stakes at personal, social, and geopolitical levels.

Yet the most successful pairing occurs with “The Promise and Pitfalls of Cognitive Enhancement” and “Dr. Hyde,” both written by David Carmel. It is also not a coincidence, I think, that this is the only story written by the author of the essay, and the effect is striking. The other essays are mostly overviews or straight statements of scientific facts, with human implications couched in terms similar to what would be seen in a scientific grant proposal: both general and generalized, with speculation limited to the concluding paragraph. Yet Carmel’s essay takes a much more personal approach, both in terms of its style (first-person singular and largely active voice, compared to the third-person singular or first-person plural and passive voice used throughout the other essays) and its content. Carmel speculates freely, explicitly grappling with arrays of potential consequences of cognitive enhancement on an individual scale, beginning where many of the other essays left off: where they concluded by saying we

as a society should think seriously about these issues, Carmel says *I will think seriously about these issues now*. He does so both in his essay and his story, which illustrates exactly the phenomenon that most concerned Carmel.

This is the synthesis that Berne aims for. As she says in her introduction, 'By eliciting moral imagination, science fiction, when paired with scientific writing, can provide a means not only of making predictions but also of creatively considering core questions regarding the implications of science and technology: What is it we value? What is it we mean to be? What may we be able to do?' (Berne, 7–8). Although Berne aims to induce this dialectic in the reader, Carmel shows that it may occur in the author, as well. It may be a coincidence that the only author to write their own accompanying story was the only author to diverge so wildly from the dehumanized style of scientific writing, but if not, then it may point to a way to replicate the dialectic Berne aims to cultivate.

This suggests to me that the true value of this volume may not reside in its content, but in its structure. While the essays are interesting and the stories are well-written ("Carnivore's Game" by Berne and "Rōnin" by Lena Nguyen stand out in particular), their overlap is mostly in content, making it seem more like a one-sided response (the story author responding to the essay writer) than a true synthesis. On the one hand, if "interesting and well-written" is the faintest praise that can be mustered, it speaks highly of the volume. Yet Carmel's example provides a potentially useful exercise in getting scientists to think humanistically about their work, one that deserves even more enthusiastic praise.

Most likely to find this volume useful, then, are teachers or professors trying to encourage their students to think holistically about science; scholars curious about this kind of foray into the relationship between science and science fiction; and writers interested in this example of writing to a prompt. Rather than scholarship *about* science fiction, *Creating Life from Life* is an example of the kind of popularization-of-science work seen in workshops such as the Joint Quantum Institute's Schrödinger Sessions and University of Wyoming's Launch Pad Astronomy Workshop.

Overall, this book doesn't so much have an argument as it has a goal. Berne is far from the only scholar interested in the relationship between science and science fiction, but her take on it as a dialectic

process and her willingness to put that theory into practice makes for a unique reading experience. Although most of the pairings of stories with essays fall short of the ambitious aim of the book, Carmel's success suggests promising next steps, and ones that I hope to see.

The Inklings Coloring Book

Lisa Macklem

James A. Owen. *The Inklings Coloring Book*. Kent, Ohio: Black Squirrel Books, 2016. Paperback, 32 pages, \$9.95, ISBN 978-1-60635-298-4.

Order option(s): [Paper](#)

IF YOU DON'T own a coloring book, chances are still good that you know someone who does. Until fairly recently, that person was likely under ten, but adult coloring books are currently a hot trend. Certainly, you can't walk into a bookstore without being confronted by a huge display of them. There are a wide variety of books to choose from, ranging from basic geometric patterns to books themed for your favorite book or television show, such as Harry Potter, Dr. Who, or Game of Thrones. There are also a series of books that invite the colorer to contribute to the picture and embark on a quest to find hidden objects.

The books have also sparked a debate on why adults have suddenly turned to this pastime and whether there is any value to it beyond the basic entertainment value. In writing about escapist literature, Tolkien defended fairy-stories: 'I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which "Escape" is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all' (J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, 1939/1947, http://www.theologynetwork.org/Media/PDF/JRR_Tolkien-fairystories.pdf). It seems likely that he would have approved of coloring as well. The New York Public Library has even instituted an Adult Coloring Group as a way for like-minded adults to enjoy the activity together. Participants can bring their own materials or use those provided. The

coloring fad has sparked a debate about whether coloring rises to the level of art therapy in providing mindfulness or meditation or whether coloring is truly a creative artistic expression. Regardless, art therapists, neuroscientists, and colorers everywhere agree that it is a great stress reliever. It's also another way that fans can connect with their favorite subject.

Just as the subject of coloring books varies, so too does the quality and detail of the artwork. James A. Owen is first and foremost an illustrator, so the drawings in the book are skillful and detailed. Given the number of coloring books that focus specifically on Narnia and Tolkien (both movie and novel versions), this book is really for fans of Owen. There are, however, somewhat disappointingly only fifteen illustrations in total, and don't expect the artwork to reach the level of Owen's other published works. One should bear in mind that if the illustrations were as detailed and shaded as the images in *Starchild*, there would be no real room (or possibly need) to color the images. In fact, the images from the coloring book, more distinctly shaded, appear in Diana Pavlac Glyer's book on the Inklings, *Bandersnatch: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and the Creative Collaboration of the Inklings*, also from Black Squirrel Books, which Owen illustrated. Each image in the coloring book appears on the recto page with the facing verso page left blank. Images have a short accompanying caption at the bottom of each page.

As the title indicates, the subject is the Inklings and those connected to them: J.R.R. Tolkien, CS Lewis, Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, Christopher Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Warren Lewis. Interspersed with pictures of the famous authors in some of their more famous haunts, such as The Eagle and Child Pub and Magdalen College, are pictures which could have come from their works but which are captioned somewhat generically, such as "Elf Queen" rather than Galadriel. The real fun of this book comes from the *Bandersnatch* which is hidden—or not so hidden—in virtually every image. Thus, the book becomes both a coloring book and a puzzle book. The blank pages may encourage some readers to add illustrations, though the author doesn't invite readers to do so. While this is clearly an "adult" coloring book, that term doesn't preclude younger readers, and one of the encouraging aspects of the book is the inclusion of all the Inklings. Thus, fans of Tolkien and CS Lewis may find this a gateway to the other, less well known, Inklings. While this book

may be useful in an Education or Psychology class, it's unlikely to be especially useful as an addition to a course in Science Fiction.

Gothic Science Fiction: 1818 to the Present

Michelle K. Yost

Sian MacArthur. *Gothic Science Fiction: 1818 to the Present*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Hardcover, vii + 176 pages, \$109.99, ISBN 978-1-137-38926-8. Ebook ISBN 978-1-137-38927-5.

Order option(s): [Hard](#) | [Kindle](#)

WHILE ITS EARLY chapters might serve as an interesting analysis for students interested in the Gothic and science fiction, Sian MacArthur's contribution to the Palgrave Gothic Series leaves a great deal to be desired, including more engagement with other academic work. The initial premise is that this book will 'attempt to understand the ways in which science fiction and traditional Gothic are linked' (3). Nowhere does Brian Aldiss receive any credit or discussion for his own contributions to this question in 1973 with *Billion Year Spree*. By the concluding chapter, though, this has changed to an attempt 'to prove that Gothic science fiction is a fully established and credible genre; that it exists independently of both Gothic and science fiction, and that it has its own set of tropes and conventions that mark it out as such' (159). In this, MacArthur has overreached, since her examples go as far as to include *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, and *Batman*, which cannot be wholly partitioned off now into their own genre of Gothic science fiction. The broadly defined themes of Gothic science fiction being 'the battle of good against evil, the battle for morality and humanity and that which allows [us] to keep our integrity intact' (161), means we would have to look much further back than 1818, to the *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Odyssey*, for the start of Gothic science fiction.

The first chapter revisits the well-trodden origin story of *Frankenstein* and certain features of the Gothic, such as 'the manic need to procreate or

generate life' (4), 'the theme of survival' (10), 'struggle between good and evil' (16), and 'repression' (16). MacArthur joins this to David Seed's definition of science fiction as 'socially relevant, and responsive to the modern technological environment' (3). These themes are more broadly explored in the following three chapters, focusing on the quintessential Mad Scientist, the Apocalypse, and the Monster. These are better developed chapters, starting with Nineteenth century examples and following their evolution into Twentieth- and Twenty-first century literature and media. MacArthur demonstrates the Gothic roots of each 'recurrent theme or sub-genre of Gothic science fiction' (23)—meaning that Gothic science fiction is not a subgenre of science fiction, but rather that the apocalyptic and monstrous are subgenres of Gothic science fiction.

It is the next three chapters where MacArthur wanders off into major media topographies and attempts to co-opt them into Gothic science fiction: *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, and *Batman* (with brief mention of other super heroes). While there are certainly Gothic elements in some episodes/storylines from these multimedia megaliths—tropes already explored in the preceding chapters—these would be better illuminated as part of a unifying Gothic theme (e.g. immortality as experienced by both The Doctor and the Sith) rather than a rundown of each source's varying Gothic imagery. MacArthur too easily gives in to the obvious counterarguments to her own theses, conceding that 'for the most part *Doctor Who* is very futuristic and science fiction oriented' and that it only 'occasionally reverts to a more traditional Gothic storyline' (113). Yet an entire chapter has been given over to The Doctor; while an admirable character in his own right, it seems this space might have been better spent on another theme or more focused media series (i.e. *Alien*). Countless other authors and Gothic tropes might have been utilized, and it is this noticeable absence that renders the second half of the book frustratingly shallow. What about the Gothic settings of cyberpunk and steampunk? What about prophecy and procreation in *Battlestar Galactica*? Or mocked Gothic à la *Rocky Horror Picture Show*? But MacArthur admits in the introduction to choosing her 'favourite sub-genres to investigate' and those 'most enjoyable

to read' (24). To this end, other novels, films, and television shows that are staples in the discourse of the Gothic are cast aside, as is critical engagement, in favor of the easy and pleasing.

The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction (3rd Ed) offers a very damning perspective in its entry on Gothic science fiction: '1) no one tale will fit perfectly any structural definition (such as Gothic SF); (2) genres (like the Gothic, or its even more artefactual offspring Gothic SF) are normally defined most clearly in retrospect' (http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/gothic_sf). To overcome this, MacArthur would need to convince us that Gothic science fiction is more than a collection of broadly similar themes. To propose an entirely distinct genre of Gothic science fiction, a more firm description of those uniquely defining aspects of the genre must be given, rather than annotations of prophecy, procreation, and moral conflict in *The Castle of Otranto* and *Revenge of the Sith*. And the idea that *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, and *Batman* 'rely on the Gothic to produce story after story that meet our expectations' (160) is likely to meet academic and fan resistance on every front; they are powerhouses unto themselves that will not be easily shifted into MacArthur's subgenre.

If it is a generalist's introduction to the Gothic that you seek, as either educator or student, then Fred Botting's *Gothic* from Routledge's New Critical Idiom series is still a better investment of time. If you are looking for texts that merge science fiction and the Gothic, there is *Gothic Science Fiction: 1980–2010* (eds Sara Wasson and Emily Alder, 2014) from the University of Liverpool's science fiction studies series providing more depth on current entries in the field. There is also *The Gothic Imagination: Conversations on Fantasy, Horror, and Science Fiction in the Media* (2011, also Palgrave Macmillan), and John C Tibbetts's discussions with creators and experts in the Gothic, such as Ray Bradbury and Kim Stanley Robinson. MacArthur does at least provide a starting point for inquiry into some common themes of Gothic science fiction; if the Mad Scientist, the Apocalyptic, and the Monstrous are facets of SF that hold one's interest, there are worse places (such as Wikipedia's one-paragraph entry) to venture into the Gothic.

Beneath the Sugar Sky

Hanna Clutterbuck-Cook

Seanan McGuire. *Beneath the Sugar Sky*, New York: Tor.com, 2018. 176 pages, hardcover \$17.99. ISBN 9780765393586.

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BENEATH THE SUGAR SKY is the third in McGuire's *Wayward Children* series, all centered around Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children. The Home is a sanctuary for those who have stepped out of this world and into another one for some period of time, then returned. The two previous books in the series, *Every Heart a Doorway* and *Down Among the Sticks and Bones*, have been exceptionally strong. McGuire's story-telling skills and world-building ability stand her in good stead here but there's no avoiding the fact that *Sugar Sky* does not have the same muscle as the previous two books.

Rather than focusing on a particular child or children—Nancy in *Every Heart* and the siblings Jack and Jill in *Sticks and Bones*—*Sugar Sky* takes a team approach. Set after the events in *Every Heart*, the catalysts for the action are newcomers to the Home, Cora who longs to return to her mermaid world; Nadya, a Drowned Girl from another aquatic world; and Rini, a native of Confection. Readers of *Every Heart* will remember Confection as the world that Sumi, Nancy's roommate, had visited. Rini and her home are in trouble and she has come in search of her mother, Sumi. Confection has fallen victim to a dictator—the Queen of Cakes—whom Sumi is destined to defeat; the only problem is that Sumi died in our world, a victim of Jill's desperation to return to The Moors. In order to solve the problem of Sumi's death, Cora, Nadya, Rini, and familiar Home tenants Christopher and Kade have to figure out how the skills learned from their otherworldly experiences can help to rescue Confection from the Queen.

The building blocks of the story are, as in the previous *Wayward Children* novellas, the stuff of fairy tales: an impossible quest, an unlikely group, a tyrant who must be toppled, people who must return

to their rightful places in the world. McGuire does her usual skillful job of playing with these pieces, making them unfamiliar enough to create an entertaining story while not making them unrecognizable.

Where *Every Heart* and *Sticks and Bones* stuck tightly to a single story, however, *Sugar Sky* meanders between characters and between worlds. It's an entertaining tour but, in the end, lacks the impact of the previous two books—which is perhaps only to be expected given the yeoman's labor McGuire put in transferring issues as complicated as gender and personal identity into a fairytale framework without falling prey to oversimplification or reductionism.

The same attention to detail is evident here but, for some reason, the story doesn't gel in the same way and the payoff, while fun, isn't as satisfying. Confection doesn't seem as deeply thought out an otherworld as The Moors or the Halls of the Dead; it works on a kind of Tim Burton-esque logic which seems unsatisfyingly familiar to anyone familiar with either the retold fairytale genre or Burton's recent attempts at Wonderland.

The story also struggles with finding a voice; since so many of the children are involved, there is no one, clear narrator. Instead, we jump between characters in a way that almost seems indecisive. The reader will never be lost—McGuire's grip on narrative is too strong for that—but they may find themselves wishing that Christopher had been chosen to comment on this scene instead of Rini or Cora instead of Nadya and this works to the detriment of the story in pulling the reader *out* of the immersive experience so beautifully created in the two previous books.

In the end, while it doesn't reach the same height as *Sticks and Bones*, *Sugar Sky* is an entirely enjoyable read; readers familiar with the previous two books will enjoy going on a roadtrip with favorite characters again and seeing more of at least two different worlds.

The Stone Sky

Amandine Faucheux

N. K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*. New York: Orbit, 2017. 464 pages, e-book, \$11.99. ISBN 978-0-316-22925-8.

Order option(s) Vol 2: [Kindle](#) | [Paper](#) | [Audio](#)

N. K. Jemisin's *The Stone Sky* concludes her Hugo Award-winning Broken Earth trilogy, preceded by the excellent *The Fifth Season* (2015) and *The Obelisk Gate* (2016). In this final novel, we continue to follow the main character Essun, who wakes up once again after having nearly destroyed the world with her orogenic powers (abilities to control tectonic plates and other seismic phenomenon) in an attempt to protect her newly-found comm of Castrima. Her personal mission, to find her daughter Nassun, taken away by her father in the first volume and who has meanwhile become as powerful an orogene as Essun, intertwines with her overall goal: to bring back the Moon into the Earth's orbit and end the apocalyptic Seasons once and for all. For Nassun has the opposite objective, namely to turn all of humanity into Stone Eaters, "living" immortal statues. Ultimately, as both struggle to control the Obelisks which function as catalysts for their power, Essun sacrifices herself for Nassun's sake and is turned into stone. Nassun is moved by the sight and decides to fulfil her mother's mission and captures the Moon.

Jemisin's multi-layered series refreshingly brings together multiple genres, from fantasy, to science fiction, to post-apocalyptic narrative. Both *The Fifth Season* and *The Obelisk Gate* use clever plot twists to reveal that what the reader assumed to be a commonly primitive, far-in-the-past fantasy setting actually exists so far in the future as to contain unfathomably advanced technology (that translates as "magic" to us). In this volume, we finally discover the backstory of Hoa, Essun's Stone Eater ally and narrator of all three volumes. Forty thousand years ago, Hoa was conceived as a "machine" by the futuristic city of Syl Anagist, in order to use the Earth's power to fuel their technology. The anthropocentric presumption of this society—to subsume the Earth as they enslaved "inferior" individuals like Hoa—consists of the original crime that formed the Seasons and doomed orogenes (descendants of that inferior race)

to exploitation and prejudice. Thus, all three novels describe a post-apocalyptic world that must survive its catastrophic decision to overuse the Earth's resources for its own selfish purposes, a timely and chilling take on our current environmental moment.

The complexity of Jemisin's multi-genre world building is reflected by the intricate framework of systemic oppression that structures the narrative throughout the series. In her prolonged metaphor, the oppression of orogenes (whose derogatory nickname "roggas" transparently informs the reader as to their symbolic meaning) both ensures society's survival and dooms it. The orogenes that the menacing Fulcrum trains and controls ensure the protection of major cities from the recurring and catastrophic natural disasters that plague the world. At the same time, the population's prejudice against and hatred of orogenes frequently results in disasters, as provoked orogenes accidentally destroy cities and kill in self-defense. As Nassun explains, 'it isn't *right*, Schaffa. It isn't right that people want me to be bad or strange or evil, that they *make* me bad...' (loc 1127). The orogene-led rogue comm of Castrima serves as an example of what would happen if orogenes were in control rather than enslaved, as they successfully manage environmental dangers. The problem, thus, is not so much the Seasons but how the systemic structure of oppression upon which society is built continues to damage both oppressed and oppressors: 'But there are none so frightened, or so strange in their fear, as conquerors. They conjure phantoms endlessly, terrified their victims will someday do back what was done to them...Conquerors live in dread of the day when they are shown to be, not superior, but simply lucky' (loc 2639).

Jemisin's elaborate metaphor for the enslavement of African-Americans and its aftermath resonates in her narrative with current issues. In *The Fifth Season*, Essun breaks Nassun's hand to teach her to control her powers even when faced with violence, a scene that brings to mind the necessary discussion some black people in the US have with their children to teach them how to protect themselves from police brutality. In *The Obelisk Gate*, Essun is forced to murder her own infant son to protect him from becoming a node-maintainer (a physically restrained, alive but unconscious machine) in a scene reminiscent of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1979). In *The Stone Sky*, the end of Seasons means that orogenes will have to struggle

to live with non-orogenic people in a world in which they are no longer “needed,” but the lesson is that change is possible: ‘Imprisonment of orogenes was never the only option for ensuring the safety of society...Lynching was never the only option...All these were choices. Different choices have always been possible’ (loc 4961).

In the way that she successfully subverts genre-specific tropes to address political issues via a complex array of narrative structures and world building, Jemisin’s oeuvre clearly belongs to the best traditions of Afrofuturism as well as feminist and queer speculative fiction. Following highly-acclaimed contemporary authors such as Nalo Hopkinson or Ann Leckie, Jemisin casually populates her worlds with a racial and gender diverse cast of characters. This book alone features Tonkee, a transwoman in a same-sex relationship and Dushwha, a non-binary person who goes by “they,” while in the previous novel *Essun* was engaged in a polyamorous triad with Innon and Alabaster, respectively bisexual and gay. Women of all races are frequently and naturally in positions of power, and in a world built around survival to natural disasters, the most prized genetic factors include a bronze-brown skin (to protect from the sun) and “ashblow” hair (natural kinky hair that protects from ash, acid rains, and diseases). The casual diversity of her books reveals Jemisin’s ability to showcase speculative fiction that isn’t afraid to reinvent its more tired tropes and characters in compelling ways.

Binti: The Night Masquerade

Jonathan P. Lewis

Nnedi Okorafor. *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, New York: Tor, 2018. 226 pages. Paperback. \$14.99, ISBN 978-0-7653-9313-5.

Order option(s): [Kindle](#) | [Hard](#) | [Paper](#) | [CD](#)

Thomas Pynchon’s 1973 novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* opens with an epigram from Wernher Von Braun: ‘Nature does not know extinction. All it knows is transformation’ (“Why I Believe in Immortality” in William Nichols’ *Third Book of Words to Live By* (1962)).

Nnedi Okorafor’s rapidly expanding body of work—which now includes *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, the worthy and valuable conclusion to the Hugo and Nebula Award winning SF series—often centers on such transformations. In her 2014 novel *Lagoon*, for example, the narrator echoes Von Braun, saying that the central character, a biologist named Adaora, knows that ‘matter could be neither created nor destroyed. It just changed form’ (138). Reading through the *Akata* series and the *Binti* series of late, I have come to see that Okorafor’s work is defined by images of transformations and change as reflections of the human condition, no matter its form. From her debut work *Zaharah the Windseeker* (2005) through *The Night Masquerade*, Okorafor’s plots continually explore transformations, particularly the oft-painful losses that arise as her characters and their worlds change.

We have witnessed Binti’s transformation from a wide-eyed adolescent leaving her family for university across the galaxy in *Binti*, to the powerful woman who struggles to fully realize and control her many abilities as a “harmonizer,” (the term among Binti’s people for one who brings peace amid conflict), in *Home*. In this final chapter, Binti must pull back the curtains on several illusions she had come to cherish about people, her home, and herself. She must not simply put aside childish ideals but rather try to create a world where those ideals can flourish. In doing so, however, Binti risks losing everyone and everything she holds dear. But as Binti underwent genetic and physiological changes from her first contact with the warrior race the Meduse in *Binti*, so she must transform herself (and be transformed by another species again) to challenge her people in *The Night Masquerade*.

Okorafor centers transformation and the horrors of loss in Binti’s journeys, and in *The Night Masquerade*. Binti herself faces the extinction of her family, her ethnic group, and herself as Okorafor relentlessly builds tension by taking away Binti’s material comforts, familiar roles, and stable cultural practices. In the opening pages of the series, Binti is caught up in the interstellar colonial war between the Meduse and the Khoush (Binti’s people): while all others on her ship are killed, through the healing properties of the Himba’s sacred *otjize* pigmented clay, Binti fashions a truce. That truce comes at the cost of her locked hair, which is replaced by the Meduse’s tentacles called *okuoko*. Early in *The Night*

Masquerade, Binti submerges herself in water and washes away all traces of *otjize* from her body before confronting the Himba elders, as vulnerable as if she were naked. They flinch at the sight of her as much as from her words, and over the course of the novel, she further risks personal extinction as Okorafor offers a fresh expression of traditional heroic tropes.

In addition, here is one of the chief joys of *The Night Masquerade*: Binti's voluntary embodiment of, as one character puts it, change and revolution, through becoming an amalgam of all the identities pressed upon her. The process recalls another key theme in Okorafor's work: transformation beyond death, previously seen in the great fish that opens "Moom!" (the prologue to *Lagoon*) and the titular main character of *The Book of Phoenix*. In this way, *The Night Masquerade* joins these works to offer scholars of African Speculative Fiction another iteration of this pattern of change and rebirth.

Okorafor deftly captures the thrills and joys of

existence as well as the horrors of loss—particularly the loss of familial identity through the deaths of loved ones and the broader losses of culture through colonialism, war, and prejudice. Among Okorafor's greatest talents is building narrative tension between the quest for self-knowledge through family, ancestry, and home, and the sense of loss stemming from an equally common desire to leave home, to strike out for the unknown, and make a new life for ourselves. Further, among the joys of any of Okorafor's texts is her consistent ability to engage familiar tropes (here the hero's journey), without a reliance on cliché.

The great power of Okorafor's storytelling in *The Night Masquerade* is her ability to focus on Binti's inner and outer conflicts and show that contextualizing loss and memory is central to being human, even as Binti herself, both at the opening and close of her story, defies extinction and transforms into something beyond the human.

Star Trek: Discovery: Season 1

Steven Mollmann

Fuller, Bryan, and Alex Kurtzman, creators. *Star Trek: Discovery*, Season 1. CBS Television Studios, 2017-18. CBS All Access, www.cbs.com/shows/star-trek-discovery.

Star Trek: Discovery marks the return of the *Star Trek* franchise to its small screen roots for the first time since *Star Trek: Enterprise* went off the air in 2005. Though drawing on the visual aesthetics of the J.J. Abrams-spearheaded big screen reboot of the franchise (2009's *Star Trek*, 2013's *Star Trek Into Darkness*, and 2016's *Star Trek Beyond*), *Discovery* is set in the so-called "Prime timeline" home to the previous six *Star Trek* television shows and the first ten films. Set about ten years before the original *Star Trek* (1966–1969), the show focuses on the character of Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green), a Starfleet officer on the USS *Shenzhou* and the human foster daughter of Spock's father Sarek (James Frain). The first two-part story, "The Vulcan Hello" and "Battle at the Binary Stars," chronicles Burnham's involvement in the instigation of a Federation-Klingon war; the remaining thirteen episodes detail Burnham's adventures on the USS *Discovery* under Captain Gabriel Lorca (Jason Isaacs) during the war.

The main story arc of *Discovery* is about the war, and like much *Star Trek*, it is a none-too-subtle mirror for our own times. The faction of the Klingons that instigates the war is led by T'Kuvma (Chris Obi), who employs nationalist rhetoric about the *cultural*, not military, threat of the Federation, arguing the Federation's multiculturalism will assimilate and gradually eliminate traditional Klingon values. He sees "we come in peace" as more of a threat than physical attack. On the other side, the Federation in general, and Michael Burnham in particular, struggle with the ethics of wartime: Burnham initially proposes a violent course of action that her captain, Philippa Georgiou (Michelle Yeoh) dismisses as conflicting with Federation values; later Burnham becomes the proponent of Federation values butting heads with the ends-justify-the-means attitudes of

Captain Lorca. While at first *Discovery* seems like a "grim and gritty" wartime take on *Star Trek*, especially during its third and fourth episodes, which focus on Lorca's dubious actions, the story arc's trajectory ultimately serves as a refutation of Burnham's initial impulses as well as Lorca's utilitarian morality.

Unfortunately, this through-line isn't quite as clear as it could be. The action that Burnham attempts to take to stop the war (firing on the Klingons unprovoked) seems as though it actually *would* have worked given T'Kuvma's rhetoric, and her rejection of utilitarian morality comes a little too quickly and too easily. When she gives a speech in the final episode about what Federation morality *should* be, it feels unearned, as we've never really seen her confront *why* she was so willing to sacrifice her morality for survival. The Klingon nationalist arc's conclusion is especially rushed, with a key character's unjustified about-face wrapping up the Klingon war quickly. Still, longtime fans of *Star Trek* will enjoy the series' commitment to the ideals of optimism in times of darkness; Burnham's speech in the finale may not entirely succeed, but a similar speech in the earlier episode "What's Past Is Prologue," where the *Discovery*'s first officer Saru (Doug Jones) commits the crew to the pluralistic values of the Federation, is a stand-up-and-cheer moment.

The real joy of *Discovery* is in the parts outside of the main story arc. Unlike many contemporary streaming shows, *Discovery* is not structured as one continuous story, but as a series of individual episodes against a common backdrop, much like its predecessor *Deep Space Nine* (1993–1996). This allows the show to play with genres, a staple of *Star Trek* going back to the original series' jumping from gladiator fights to 1920s gangster comedy to cosmic disaster story to Vietnam War allegory in succession. At its best, *Discovery* reworks well-trod *Star Trek* tropes; more so than any other *Star Trek* series, it feels like it was designed for people who grew up watching *Star Trek* (and other genre media). The best episode in this regard is "Magic to Make the Sanest Man Go Mad," a time loop episode in the mold of *The Next Generation*'s "Cause and Effect" (1992) or *Stargate SG-1*'s "Window of Opportunity" (2000), but one that acknowledges that there have been so many time loop stories told in sf television in the past twenty-five years that the story does not need to spend time introducing and explaining the concept. Instead, it can just play with it. The story innovates

in a couple ways, depicting the time loop from the perspective of an *unaware* character—but because the viewer is familiar with these kinds of stories, they can follow what the character cannot. Additionally, it explores some of the trope’s implications: the villain Harry Mudd uses the time loop as a learning experience to carry out a heist, reiterating the same events with incremental improvements every time until he’s able to achieve his goal. At the same time it plays with these common sf television tropes, it also finds moments for character introspection, adds some backstory to a pre-existing *Star Trek* character (Mudd appeared in two episodes of the original series), and indulges in some black comedy.

Later in the first season, the show puts a new spin on old concepts through a visit to the “mirror universe,” the dark alternate timeline first seen in the original series episode “Mirror, Mirror” (1967) and revisited on both *Deep Space Nine* and *Enterprise*. Like in many previous mirror universe episodes, the characters pretend to be their mirror counterparts, but *Discovery* explores the moral cost of this more than previous *Star Treks*, with Burnham having to spend multiple episodes impersonating her brutal, genocidal counterpart, and finding out how easy it is to *become* that person. On the other hand, the show understands that the entire idea of the mirror universe is inherently goofy and isn’t afraid to mock itself, such as the revelation that one of the main cast, Cadet Sylvia Tilly (Mary Wiseman), has a counterpart nicknamed “Captain Killy.” Not everything about the mirror universe works—the idea that the mirror universe Terrans *literally* don’t like light is silly, and *Discovery*’s revelation about the origins of a key character strips that character of some of the nuance the show had previously built up—but *Discovery*’s foray into the mirror universe proves to be the most effective and interesting one since its original 1967 appearance.

Discovery returns to classic *Star Trek* values (arguably sorely needed in these pessimistic times) and is willing to innovate with tropes that had become tired by 2005, after nineteen continuous years and twenty-five seasons of churned-out franchise material. I remain a little skeptical that this had to be a prequel (it carries a lot of the usual baggage of prequels, but there are times it does shed a new light on the original series), but *Discovery* provides a potent case study for how the *best* franchise fiction manages to balance the old with the new.

Annihilation

Benjamin J. Robertson

Annihilation. Dir. Alex Garland. Perf. Natalie Portman, Tessa Thompson, Gina Rodriguez, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Oscar Isaac. Paramount. 2018.

AS WITH ANY novel-to-film adaptation, *Annihilation*, Alex Garland’s production of Jeff VanderMeer’s 2014 novel of the same name, raises questions about the relationship between the original text and what it becomes when rewritten for and visualized in an altogether different medium. Although I cannot avoid implicit, and sometimes explicit, comparisons along these lines in this review, my intent is to address the film itself and think through its status in relationship to the weird, a genre of writing associated with HP Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith and, more recently, with VanderMeer, China Miéville, Steph Swainston, and others.

The weird has rarely been adapted to cinema with any success, in sharp contrast to other forms of horror, such as the Gothic, which has long been a staple of cinematic horror. *Annihilation* does not, unfortunately, prove to be a clear exception to this rule. The effects weird fiction produces by way of the written form do not seem to translate well to visual media. Despite some truly stunning moments of beauty and horror, *Annihilation* largely fails to achieve the weird insofar as it falls into conventions more clearly associated with the disaster film and the Gothic.

Of course, we might read *Annihilation* as a success nonetheless. Whatever its shortcomings as weird film, it represents the sort of science fiction I believe many readers of this review would like to see more of: cerebral and thought-provoking rather than muscular and action-oriented, small and claustrophobic rather than grand and “epic,” focused on women and people of color rather than on white men, artistic rather than popular. Along such lines, we must celebrate *Annihilation* and support it. Nonetheless, I find it disappointing that the film cannot articulate in a visual and/or aural form the overall weirdness of VanderMeer’s novel for the fact that this inability comes with the cost of losing the novel’s environmental and planetary concerns. In 2018, this sin may be unforgivable.

Annihilation tells the story of Lena (Natalie

Portman), a former Army officer and present professor of biology at the Johns Hopkins University specializing in the life cycle of the individual cell. Her husband, Kane (Oscar Isaac), a Special Forces operative, deploys on a mission that seems to Lena more mysterious than usual. After he fails to return, Lena tries to discover what became of him and where he had been deployed, but she runs into too many dead ends and eventually gives up. When Kane finally does show up at their home, unannounced and very disoriented, Lena and he are both taken captive by a government agency tasked with exploring and understanding something called “the shimmer,” an area in a remote part of the American coast surrounded by what looks like a giant soap bubble. Inside the shimmer, animal and plant life have mutated in impossible ways as the result of an unknown event that took place three years earlier. In order to discover a means of healing her husband, whose health rapidly deteriorates after he returns to the normal world, Lena enters the shimmer with a group of four other women, each of whom has her own reasons for undertaking what is more than once referred to as a “suicide mission.” Each of the four women other than Lena meet some strange and/or grisly fate during the expedition. Lena alone returns to tell the tale, although she may no longer be the person who set out on the journey to begin with.

The film’s primary narrative, of the mission into the shimmer, is framed by three narratives. I shall return to the first of these narratives in a moment. The second narrative frame, and the first which involves a human being, shows us Lena’s interrogation/debriefing upon returning to Area X (in the film, the headquarters of the agency investigating the shimmer rather than the part of *the world* affected by the event that causes the shimmer). This interrogation is, in a word, dehumanizing. Lena’s affect, and especially that of her interrogator (Benedict Wong), is stilted and cold (the film features unemotional acting throughout, perhaps in an attempt to convey weirdness or horror). It is shot in stark right angles and features people largely concealed by hazmat suits. The interrogator’s questions suggest profound ignorance and utter lack of concern for the human being sitting across from him. Nonetheless, as I discuss below, this interrogation serves mainly to humanize the shimmer to the extent it is possible to do so. In contrast to this interrogation, which in the end reveals very little about what the shimmer

is or what it means to the future of the world, the other human narrative frame begins with joy and light. Here we meet Lena and her husband, Kane, the former an academic and the latter a career special operative. Whatever their differences, however much time they spend apart, they nonetheless seem to love each other, or at least lust after one another. They spend a good deal of time in bed, playfully leading up to sexual intercourse. These moments of levity are perhaps the least believable in the film, but they nonetheless set the stage for Lena’s motivation. At some point, it seems, she has had an affair with a colleague. Kane, in a manner not clear from the film, finds out about the affair and therefore takes the mission into the shimmer. Lena chases after him in an attempt to atone for what Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh), a psychologist who goes on the mission with Lena, suggests is common act of self-destruction that nearly all living things undertake for reasons that remain murky.

These two narrative frames are largely absent from the novel and serve here as humanized entry points into what would otherwise be a very difficult main narrative, no matter the dehumanizing nature of the one or the lack of believability of the other. Whereas the novel could rely on the biologist’s interior monologue to hint at her motivation and the events that led to her involvement with the expedition, the film must visually represent these events and thus draw the audience out of the shimmer on numerous occasions. Far from reinforcing the weirdness found inside the shimmer, these moments serve to index that weirdness to a human scale. The shimmer threatens the world with destruction, as if the world were some well-defined place apprehensible by human faculties through the cold logic of science. The shimmer provides a means for salvation or redemption, as if the self-destruction of a single individual (or any number of individuals) matters in the face of the cosmic forces, the *weird* forces, at work inside.

The anthropocentric and anthropomorphic tendencies within the film manifest, strangely, in what is perhaps the most cosmic moment in it, the first of the film’s narrative frames. In its opening shot, *Annihilation* shows us what seems to be a meteor crashing through our planet’s atmosphere and into a lighthouse. The lighthouse will turn out to be the center of the shimmer and the setting for the film’s climax. However, the scale of this opening

sequence does not grant access to some scale beyond the human, the scale at which the Anthropocene operates, for example. Rather, when coupled to the ensuing narrative, it turns *Annihilation* into a disaster film, complete with the human scale that genre implies. Lena and company enter the shimmer to understand it and, ultimately, defeat it and save the world from destruction. When Lena, in the end, encounters her own double, she blows it up with a grenade. As a result, the lighthouse and the strange tunnel within it begin to burn and the shimmer collapses. The film's final shot suggests that the Lena and Kane, who alone have returned from the shimmer, are no longer human, but the loss of the weird and non-anthropomorphic space of the shimmer reduces this inhumanity to some kind of horror-from-within, a horror more characteristic of the Gothic than the weird.

I do wish to note that the film does contain some genuinely weird *moments*. Hearing a human scream come from the terrifying mouth of a mutant "bear" that attacks Lena's expedition on two occasions is, in word, unsettling. The images of the plants, and the plant-animal hybrids, that run rampant throughout the shimmer are stunning in their color and apparent pervasiveness. Josie's (Tessa Thompson) stepped transformation into a human-shaped tree is strange—and strangely beautiful. Dr. Ventress's final claim about the shimmer before her death—"It's not like us. It's *unlike* us. I don't know what it wants. Or *if* it wants."—hints at something irreducible to human concerns. However, with few exceptions, these moments seem mainly, and simply, aesthetic—window dressing that attempts to convince us that something weird is taking place rather than effective production of the weird itself. These moments fail to

be weird because they remain *for a human audience* and *in human terms*, representations that seek to convey a given meaning to an audience that only knows how to think in terms of what means to it. The human scale at which they take place, and the fact that they are so easily apprehended by human faculties, may say something about the metaphorical and real relationships between human knowledge and sight, the sense most clearly associated with Hollywood cinema. Whatever the case, *Annihilation* does not escape from the human to the extent that VanderMeer does in his novel.

Again, in and of itself, it may be too much to call *Annihilation* a failure for this reason. After all, doing so suggests that the film should be judged by an abstract standard created by human knowledge practices and applied as a *measure* as if it were objective and true. However, in the era known as the Anthropocene, an era in which humanity has come to understand both its relationship to planetary forces and the degree to which these forces outstrip our every effort to grasp them, we need a means to measure how well our cultural productions grapple with such issues. Weirdly, this measure cannot itself be human, if "human" refers us to modern notions of subjectivity, knowledge, politics, science, criticality, capitalism, or history—the very notions that in part produced the Anthropocene to begin with. In the end, *Annihilation* relies on an anthropocentric and anthropomorphic indexicality for its effects, for its frights, for its weirdness. In 2018, when we understand (if dimly) that the ground beneath our feet cares nothing for such indexicality, perhaps we need newer, weirder means through which to represent—or, better, experience—the planet.

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Submission: Please submit a 200-300 word abstract of your presentation, plus a 100 word bio to SFPC conference co-chair Carrie J. Cole, using the online form at <http://www.caperteam.com/sfpc/>. Proposals will be reviewed on a rolling basis; submit early to ensure best opportunity for acceptance.

Accepted presenters may also be invited to participate in *HawaiiCon* public panels. Attendance to the entirety of the larger *HawaiiCon* conference is included with the SFPC registration fee, as well as a copy of the published peer-reviewed, academic proceedings.

For more information on SCIENCE FICTIONS, POPULAR CULTURES, see <http://www.caperteam.com/sfpc/> or email spfc@caperteam.com.

Call for Papers—Articles

Title: *Monographic issue "Horror and the Fantastic"*

Completed Chapter Deadline: 10th June 2018

Contact: <http://revistes.uab.cat/brumal/pages/view/callforpaper>

SINCE ITS BIRTH, the fantastic has been an excellent way to explore our fears of the unknown – “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind”, as Lovecraft stated in his well-known essay *The Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927). The aim of the fantastic is to destabilise the codes that we have established to understand and represent the real: when we are confronted with the conflictive coexistence of the possible and the impossible in a realistic world like ours, our certainties about the real stop working. Faced with this, fear is our only defence.

This is the type of experience that we want to examine in this monographic issue of *Brumal*. For this reason, we will exclude forms of fear that arise from a natural source (serial killers, terrorism, animal attacks, etc.). Instead, we encourage reflections on the multiple ways through which what we have called “metaphysical fear” – an effect that is inherent and exclusive to the fantastic – is spread, generated by the transgressive irruption of the impossible.

This monographic issue of *Brumal* will accept works focused on the relationship between Horror and the Fantastic in literature, cinema, TV, comic, theatre, etc.

Some areas of research include, but are not limited to:

- Theoretical perspectives on horror
- The rhetoric of fear
- From classical fears to postmodern horror
- The monster as the fantastic anomaly
- Space as source of horror
- Horror and its boundaries

Brumal will only consider works of a fantastic nature as defined by the journal, hereby only accepting papers on other non-mimetic genres such as the marvellous or science fiction if and when they are related to the fantastic narrative.

Submission: Please visit the *Brumal* website at <http://revistes.uab.cat/brumal/about/submissions#authorGuidelines>.

Title: *So Say We All: Religion and Society in Science Fiction (Special Issue of Religions journal)*

Completed Chapter Deadline: 1st August 2018

Contact: James Thrall (jthrall@knox.edu)

Science fiction wanders perennially in realms traditionally considered the purview of religion, asking questions about the ordering of the universe, the nature of existence, and the proper basis for human (and non-human) relations. When the speculative force of science fiction is directed toward imagining societies shaped by distinct sets

of values, often those systems of value are or could be understood to be religious. This Special Issue of *Religions* journal will explore the ways science fiction constructs social systems of meaning that are either explicitly or implicitly religious, both in recasting received religious forms, and in imagining new forms of its own. What wider social assumptions are being rehearsed when the crew on Battlestar Galactica joins in the ritualized affirmation “So say we all”? Or when any imagined community functions according to shared (or at least enforced) general principles that take on the power of religious norms? What religiously motivated processes of refinement, recalibration, or rejection might be at work in resistance to those social foundations? Our focus will be on the issues—*aesthetic, ethical, spiritual, practical*—raised by science fiction as it invents social frameworks for answering the religious question “How shall we live?” and its concomitant, “How shall we not live.” Articles addressing science fiction in any form, including written texts, film and television, are welcome. Information about the journal and the special issue is available here: http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/sciencefiction.

Submission: Manuscripts should be submitted online at www.mdpi.com by registering (<https://susy.mdpi.com/user/register>) and logging in (<https://susy.mdpi.com/user/login>). Manuscripts can be submitted until the deadline. All papers will be peer-reviewed. Accepted papers will be published continuously in the journal (as soon as accepted) and will be listed together on the special issue website. The “article processing charge” for this issue will be waived or covered by a grant.

Science Fiction Research Association

www.sfra.org

The Science Fiction Research Association is the oldest professional organization for the study of science fiction and fantasy literature and film. Founded in 1970, the SFRA was organized to improve classroom teaching; to encourage and assist scholarship; and to evaluate and publicize new books and magazines dealing with fantastic literature and film, teaching methods and materials, and allied media performances. Among the membership are people from many countries—students, teachers, professors, librarians, futurologists, readers, authors, booksellers, editors, publishers, archivists, and scholars in many disciplines. Academic affiliation is not a requirement for membership. Visit the SFRA Website at www.sfra.org. For a membership application, contact the SFRA Treasurer or see the Website.

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SFRA Annual Directory

One issue per year. Members' names, contact information, and areas of interest.

SFRA Listserv

Ongoing. The SFRA listserv allows members to discuss topics and news of interest to the SF community, and to query the collective knowledge of the membership. To join the listserv or obtain further information, visit wiz.cath.vt.edu/mailman/listinfo/sfra-l.

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Three issues per year. This scholarly journal includes critical, historical, and bibliographical articles, review articles, reviews, notes, letters, international coverage, and annual index.

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Science Fiction Film and Television

Three issues per year. Critical works and reviews. Add to dues: \$59 (e-issue only); \$73 (airmail).

Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts

Four issues per year. Scholarly journal, with critical and bibliographical articles and reviews. Add to dues: \$40/1 year (US); \$50/1 year (international); \$100/3 years.

Femspec

Critical and creative works. Add to dues: \$50 (US); \$95 (US institutional); \$60 (international); \$105 (international institutional).

