

BOOK REVIEWS

WHAT'S A BRIGHT FEMINIST LIKE YOU DOING IN A GENRE LIKE THIS? READING WOMEN'S SCIENCE FICTION

by Helen Merrick

Justine Larbalestier, ed., *DAUGHTERS OF EARTH: FEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006. 424p. bibl. pap., \$27.95, ISBN 978-0819566768.

Judith A. Little, ed., *FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE FICTION: UTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAS*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007. 411p. bibl. index. pap., \$27.98, ISBN 978-1591024149.

Joanna Russ, *THE COUNTRY YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN: ESSAYS AND REVIEWS*. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2007. 288p. bibl. index. pap., \$35.00, ISBN 978-0853238690.

Lisa Yaszek, *GALACTIC SUBURBIA: RECOVERING WOMEN'S SCIENCE FICTION*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2008. 256p. bibl. pap., \$22.95, ISBN 978-0814251645.

Marleen S. Barr, ed., *AFRO-FUTURE FEMALES: BLACK WRITERS CHART SCIENCE FICTION'S NEWEST NEW-WAVE TRAJECTORY*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2008. 304p. bibl. \$44.95, ISBN 978-0814210789.

I want to let you in on a little secret. There is a hidden history of feminist activism, writing, consciousness-raising, and community. Some claim Mary Shelley started it, others that the foundations were laid in the nineteenth-century utopias of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary Lane Bradley. Many date its beginnings to escapees from 1930s and 1940s women's magazines who wrote for garish pulp publications under ambiguous monikers such as C.L. Moore. Contemporaneous with the women's movement, it produced radical feminist visions that inspired intense political debate. Marge Piercy, Angela Carter, and Margaret Atwood have all flirted with it, although they haven't always admitted it. I am talking about science fiction (SF) or, to be precise, feminist SF, the topic of the books under review and a particular passion of mine.

So why the roundabout introduction? Mainly because for most feminists, SF is not seen as a likely home for feminism. Recalling her time working in a feminist bookshop in the 1970s, writer and editor Susanna Sturgis describes the reaction she received when encouraging feminists to read SF:

Astonishing! Some people stared at me bewildered, as if my English had become incomprehensible. Others gazed with a complex mixture of pity and contempt, or they murmured, "Oh, I don't read fantasy or science fiction."¹

Before you assume that readers of feminist SF are indeed a rarity, if not an anachronism, let me assure you that Sturgis and I are not alone. Other, more redoubtable critics than I — including Donna Haraway,

Hilary Rose and Teresa de Lauretis — have valued feminist SF as a unique and innovative forum for feminist theorizing. The books under review here give voice to the rich history of feminist experiment, revisioning, and activism that distinguishes feminist engagement with SF. And for those of you who have never read SF — and even if you never will — don't turn to the next review just yet! Enjoyment or knowledge of SF is not necessarily required in order to appreciate what these books offer: a glimpse into a fascinating chapter of feminist history that may well expand your view of feminist fiction, writing, and culture more generally.

This collection of texts signals somewhat of a renewal of academic study of feminism and SF. With scattered beginnings in the SF and women's movement magazines of the early seventies, a uniquely feminist branch of SF criticism emerged in

specialized SF journals of the 1980s, with the first monograph appearing in 1989, Sarah Lefanu's *In the Chinks of the World Machine*. There followed a series of other studies and collections through the 1990s, peaking with Jenny Wolmark's *Aliens and Others* in 1996. Emerging somewhat later, and for the most part in isolation from academic literary criticism, feminist SF criticism has been marked by its particular (and peculiar) cultural location. In addition to the familiar challenges of developing within a male-dominated tradition, feminist SF is doubly marginalized by its location in the culturally stigmatized arena of SF and its subjection to internal sexism and androcentrism arising from the genre's centralizing of technoscientific narratives. As in other areas, feminist writers and fans were often berated for bringing didacticism and "politics" into the boys' playground, challenging their visions of the future and their right to control the narratives of science and technology.

A key role of feminist SF criticism has been recovering herstory: documenting the place of women writers in the field prior to the influence of the women's movement. Because of the ephemeral nature and rarity of many of the early SF magazine publications, stories by early women writers are difficult to find.² Thus, short story collections have been vital in documenting and preserving the history of feminist SF. Justine Larbalestier's *Daughters of Earth* continues the tradition of anthologies such as those by Pamela Sargent,³ with the addition of critical essays reflecting on the fiction. Larbalestier invited critics to choose one feminist SF story to write about; the result is eleven paired stories and articles, covering

every decade from the twenties through to the present, except the 1940s. Larbalestier explains her desire "to find a balance...between introducing people to long-out-of-print stories they would never otherwise read and reprinting



better-known works that have never been the subject of study" (p.xv). Indeed, many of the stories here have had little, if any, scholarly attention to date, thus fulfilling her dual purpose.

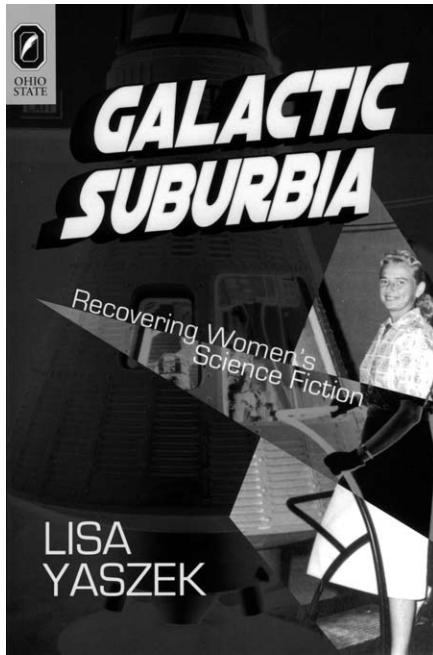
As Larbalestier points out, not every writer one would expect is represented here — some central authors in the feminist SF canon are absent, including Joanna Russ, Ursula le Guin, and Suzy McKee Charnas, although Russ and le Guin have attracted significant critical attention within the field. Other central and key writers are present, however, including James Tiptree, Jr. (pseudonym of Alice Sheldon), Pamela Zoline (famous almost solely for the story in this collection, "The Heat Death of the Universe"), Gwyneth Jones, and Octavia Butler, the pioneer of African American women's SF.⁴ The

first woman to publish a story in the pulp magazines, Clare Winger Harris (1927), is included, as is "one of the genre's first female stars" (p.50), Leslie G. Stone (1931). Stone's work often explored gender roles, no mean feat for SF of the time, and also proof that issues of gender and sex have in fact been central in SF since the 1920s.

This collection also brings many of the genre's best critics together, including Veronica Hollinger, Wendy Pearson, Brian Attebery, and Jane Donawerth. Although it might be over-reaching to claim it as a "complete introduction to twentieth-century feminist science fiction" (p.xv), this volume certainly does indicate the breadth of feminist concerns represented by feminist SF and its criticism. The critical interplay between fiction and essay clearly shows why SF has been attractive to writers and critics, as the works range over issues of sex, gender, race, sexuality, successful matriarchies, critiques of domesticity, and countless other feminist themes.

Highlights for me include Hollinger's discussion of Gwyneth Jones (one of my favorite feminist authors inside or outside the field, and an insightful and deadly critic). Jones's story, "Balinese Dancer" (a companion story to her 2004 novel, *Life*), is a thought experiment about sex and gender that also "directly addresses the conflicted situation of contemporary feminist politics" (p.333) as well as the "tangled complexities of the sex/gender system" (pp.334–335). Pearson draws on feminist and queer theory to read Tiptree's "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill Side" as an analogy in which "the presumptive male reader of science fiction" is put "in the position of the abject, the alien dark; it makes him feel, in every iota of his being, what it is like to be on the other side of the gender divide"

(p.185). Professor of Afro American Studies Andrea Hairston celebrates the work of Octavia Butler and her place in the history of black women's



writing and criticism; a champion of both feminism and SF writing in and for the black community, Butler is, in Hairston's terms, a "prophetic artist... Rehearsing the possible in the face of catastrophe, she calls us all to action" (p.302).

If the scope of feminist SF's history is signalled in Larbalestier's collection, its richness is detailed in Lisa Yaszek's *Galactic Suburbia*. Yaszek's study of post-war women's SF points to an important new trajectory in feminist SF criticism — the move toward broader cultural examinations cognizant of, for example, the histories of science and technology as important contexts for studies of SF. In particular, Yaszek's book does invaluable work in focusing on the decades of the forties and fifties — an era often underplayed and undervalued in SF criticism as well as in histories of feminism and the women's movement. Yaszek's work is

animated by the trope of the "galactic suburbia," a term used by Joanna Russ to mock the kinds of social situations imagined by many SF writers: "set in high-tech, far futures where gender relations still look suspiciously like those of 'present-day, white middle-class suburbia'" (pp.3–4; citing Russ).⁵ Russ argued that most women in the field at the time (1970) wrote this kind of fiction, or what she disparagingly referred to as "ladies' magazine fiction." Yaszek rightly observes that Russ's purpose in distinguishing between (and judging) "different types of women's speculative fiction was key to the project of defining feminist SF as an emergent narrative tradition in its own right. But as artists and scholars turned their attention to this new narrative tradition, earlier women SF authors were relegated to the margins of literary and cultural history" (p.4).

Yaszek sets out to redress the neglect of women writers such as Judith Merrill, Carol Emshwiller, and Mildred Clingerman, who have to date received very little critical attention. In re-evaluating their work, she not only "recovers women's history" but also seeks to demonstrate the important work these writers did in paving the way for later feminist work, in their provision of a "potent critical voice about the relations of science, society and gender" (p.5).

Yaszek's readings are organized around a number of themes, and she includes chapters on "homemakers," "activists," and "scientists," each of which begins with an overview of the relevant broader history: the development of homemaking in the Cold War era; women's involvement in peace activism and the Civil Rights movement; and, finally, women's role in science and technology in the post-war era. Yaszek draws on these histories (which of necessity are slighter than

one might like) to show how these women writers used SF to subvert normative expectations about, for example, women's domestic roles or their combining of family and scientific work.

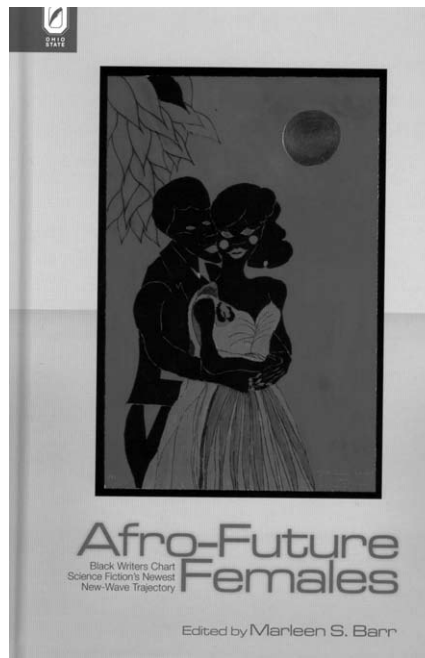
In one of its most fascinating sections, *Galactic Suburbia* goes beyond the fiction writers to explore how women writing for the "science fact" sections of SF magazines also used that venue to protest and subvert expectations about women's ability — and desire — to claim a scientific role and voice for themselves. As Yaszek argues, such women were part of a "centuries-old tradition of Anglophone women's science popularization" who used this particular venue and narrative "to authoritatively comment on a diverse range of scientific and social topics" (pp.161, 165). Yaszek demonstrates not just how the social history of the time informs and contextualises the writings, but also how women's SF might throw light on this period of women's history — particularly around women's perceived and actual relation to science and technology and the kinds of unique authorial positions afforded by SF.

Even as feminist SF criticism has operated largely outside the purview of its more respectable literary sister, both reflect the particular biases of the Anglo-American critical tradition in their focus on white experience and writing. *Afro-Future Females* sets out to redress the balance in SF by highlighting the writings of African American women, in the process also demonstrating how such writing challenges our notions of genre and literature. This collection is the third in a sort of series by Marleen S. Barr, who has been one of the pioneers

and staunchest advocates of feminist SF criticism. Barr warns in her introduction that her approach and style may be challenging for some. For me, it is not the attempt to find a more accessible critical voice that unnerves, but Barr's strange juxtaposition of texts (for example, where she uses Italo Calvino to illustrate the development of black women's SF) and her desire to claim a privileged space as midwife to black women's SF criticism.

Nevertheless, this collection does invaluable work in showcasing the fictional and critical writings of black women in SF and challenging our understandings of the divisions among SF, fantasy, magic realism, and mainstream fiction in this writing. The regrettably short section of fiction nevertheless includes stories from black SF's matriarch, Butler, as well as some of the newer writers lighting up the genre: Nalo Hopkinson, Nisi Shawl, Hairston, and Sheree R. Thomas (editor of the pathbreaking *Dark Matter* collections of black SF). Also vital are the critical articles that examine such newer writers in relation to black women's history and writing, rather than the usual concentration on the work of Butler and black SF author and critic Samuel R. Delany. Other pieces include author reflections, responses, memorials to Butler, and a fabulous interview with Delany on race, sex, sexuality, and power in SF. I may quibble with Barr about her framing of this material, but I cannot help but agree with her that black women's SF challenges the ways "we read and define science fiction itself" (p.xv), and even that it is "the most exciting literature of the twenty-first-century present" (p.xxi).

Afro-Future Females looks to the future, as well as joining Larbalestier's and Yaszek's work in challenging



and revising feminist SF's history. In contrast, Judith A. Little's *Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction* presents a strangely static and stilted picture of the genre. Intended as a textbook, Little's volume includes many excellent examples of classic and contemporary feminist SF, intended as exemplars that demonstrate some of the key questions occupying feminist philosophy. The stories deliver in this regard, but the commentaries do not. Framed by too many introductions to various sections, Little's editorial material spends too much time on Philosophy 101, with a rather dated overview of feminist philosophy (liberal, Marxist, socialist, radical) appearing almost as an afterthought. The fiction alone might be worth purchasing the book for, although many of the stories are anthologised in other collections that would provide a better sampling of feminist SF, while the brief extracts from novels are likely to be frustrating rather than revealing for readers unaware of the originals. The discussion questions following each reading are often trite, adding little to

the book, and leaving me wondering what kind of reader Little was aiming at.

One writer who never underestimates her readers is Joanna Russ. Even feminists who might shudder at the very thought of SF are likely to have at least *heard* of Russ — if not for her revolutionary novel *The Female Man*, then at least for some of her groundbreaking literary criticism, such as "How to Suppress Women's Writing" and "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write." *The Country You Have Never Seen* offers a wide-ranging selection of Russ's non-fiction writing covering three decades. Much of the collection consists of book reviews written from 1966 to 1981, primarily for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, but also for other publications such as *The Village Voice* and *The Washington Post*. There are also critical articles that have not been anthologised elsewhere, including one of the key documents in feminist SF criticism, "The Image of Women in Science Fiction." Concluding the book are letters to a variety of publications that represent a historical catalogue of feminist periodicals, from lesbian and feminist journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*, *Frontiers*, and *Chrysalis* to the more academic *Signs* and *The Women's Review of Books*. These listings alone indicate the variety of roles and activities Russ has pursued throughout her career; only a closer reading, however, reveals the extent to which her feminist politics are as evident in reviewing for SF magazines as in the more obvious sphere of feminist publications.

Unlike most of the other books reviewed here, the Russ collection provides a glimpse of the unique community around SF that made possible the emergence and even nurturing of feminist writing and

activity. Although none of her letters to fan publications are here, you do get glimpses of the committed communicator who attempted to educate fellow (male) SF writers as much as feminist critics and readers.⁶ Russ was always ready to discomfit her (mostly male) readers, happily announcing in a review for *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, for example, that

[t]he most exciting social extrapolation around nowadays can be found in *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone. You will have a hard time with this book if you believe that Capitalism is God's Way or that Manly Competition is the Law of the Universe — but then you can go back to reading *The Skylark of Valeron* or whatever and forget about the real future. (pp.62–63)

Russ's talent as writer, critic, and activist is evident in every piece in this book. Anyone who writes book reviews or is interested in feminist history and politics will find something to delight, instruct, and amuse in Russ's works — whether she is reviewing terrible, unknown SF novels or writing letters calling feminist critics to task for their (mis)understanding of the “Lesbian/Feminist Sex Wars” (p.297). The wit and clarity with which she dissects the literary and ideological operations of texts means that even reading thirty-year-old book reviews is both pleasurable and instructive. (And what other collection of book reviews would make you laugh out loud?) Praise from Russ is hard-earned, although dazzling when it is conferred: “The less I say about this story the less I will slobber over the page and make a nut of myself” (p.8). She has no patience, however, with lazy writing or editing, nor with books that underestimate

the intelligence of their readers. Concluding a review of a particularly poor first novel by John Boyd, Russ is clear about where the blame should lie:

I forgive Mr Boyd the anguish this novel caused me and hope he will eventually forgive me the anguish this review may cause him, but for Berkley [the publisher] there is no forgiveness. Only reform. *Don't do it again.* (p.32)

The novelist's care for and attention to language shines through every critical judgement and observation. To give just a brief sampling, here is Russ on SF in academe: “Science fiction is receiving more academic attention than it used to, a species of kindness that may turn out to be the equivalent of being nibbled to death by ducks” (p.68). On early Star Trek fan fiction: “a ten-year-old's toy rabbit made very carefully with love and effort but a lot of the little wheels and things got left on the kitchen table and when you try to make it stand up it collapses” (p.127). Behind the deadly humor is serious intent and a passionate commitment to feminist and queer politics and activism. A recurring theme in Russ is the need to challenge the gendered and heteronormative order that results in the anomaly of the “female man.” In one review she rails against the use of male pronouns by authors such as Le Guin in their attempts to depict societies with different gendered norms:

[S]urely science fiction writers, of all people, ought not to submit tamely to this wholesale theft of pronominal normativeness. Bite your tongue and write “she”; if you look at it long enough, it will

actually start looking human. And for extra-terrestrials, invent. (p.149)

And if this particular battle seems quaintly dated, never fear, there are unfortunately plenty of other cavils here that remain all too pertinent today.

All who can in good conscience call themselves feminist should really be familiar with Russ. If you haven't read *The Female Man*, then begin to atone by reading *The Country You Have Never Seen*. (You'll be safe — there is no actual science fiction in it). But be warned: You may find yourself wondering whether, if a writer so brilliant, radical, and complex is this passionate about SF, there is perhaps something more to it after all than geeky boys with ray guns. There's only one way to find out ...

Notes

1. Susanna J. Sturgis, “Notes of a Border Crosser,” in *Women of Other Worlds: Excursions through Science Fiction and Feminism*, eds. Helen Merrick & Tess Williams (Perth, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1999), pp.103–114 (quotation is from p.104). See also her article from which my title is borrowed: “Editorial Memories and Visions, or Why Does a Bright Feminist Like You Read That Stuff Anyway?” in *Memories and Visions: Women's Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susana J. Sturgis (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1989), pp.1–9.
2. Short stories are central to the genre's history, as the short story and novella forms were the mainstay of the genre before the advent of mass-market paperback and book club publications.
3. Sargent edited a number of pioneering collections of women's and femi-

nist SF in the 1970s, as well as two later collections in the 1990s; see her *Women of Wonder* (1975); *More Women of Wonder* (1976); *The New Women of Wonder* (1978); *Women of Wonder: The Classic Years* (1996); and *Women of Wonder: The Contemporary Years* (1996).

4. The black and feminist SF communities were shaken by Butler's untimely death in 2006; see <http://www.sfw.org/members/butler/>

5. Strangely, nowhere does Yaszek quote the whole statement from which this term is taken, which I find as amusing as it is revealing:

[T]he authors who write reasonably sophisticated and literature science fiction...see the relations between the sexes as those of present-day, white, middleclass suburbia. Mummy and Daddy may live inside a huge amoeba and Daddy's job may be to test psychedelic drugs or cultivate yeast-vats, but the world inside their heads is the world of Westport and Rahway and that world

is never questioned...In short, the American middle class with a little window dressing.

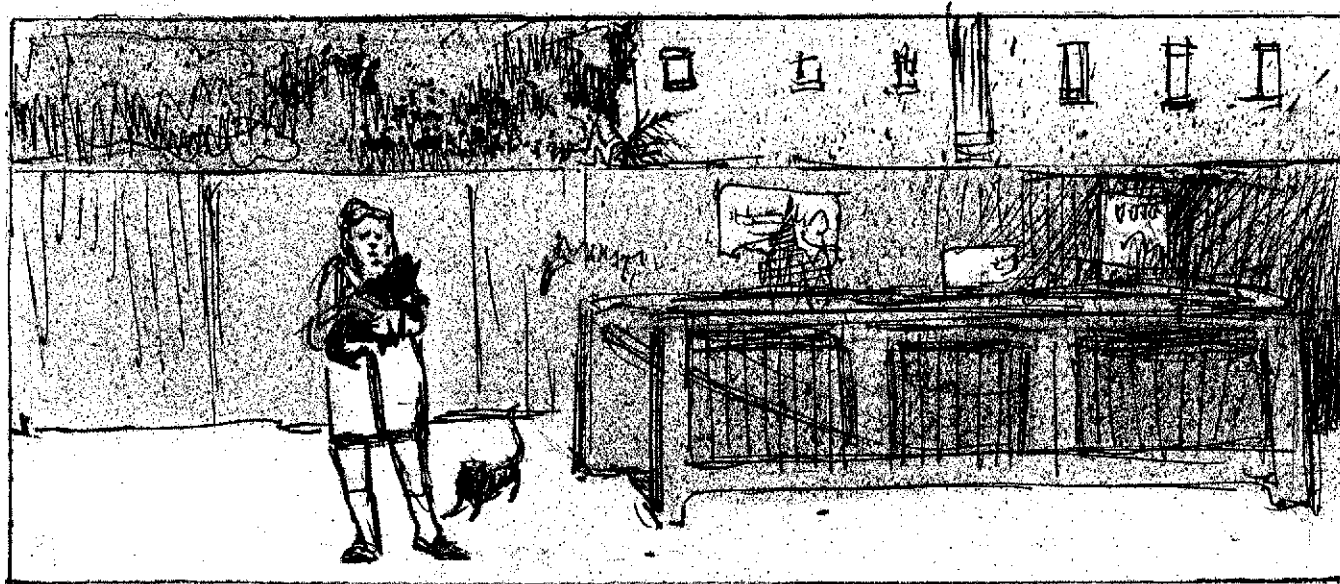
From "The Image of Women" in *The Country You Have Never Seen* (pp.206–207). This essay was originally published in 1970 in the feminist journal *The Red Clay Reader* (not, as Yaszek states, in 1971). The essay was reprinted in Susan Koppelman Cornillon, ed., *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1972), and then in the SF magazine *Vertex* in 1974.

6. The SF community is primarily animated by its "fans," or committed readers, who since the 1930s have corresponded through amateur publications called fanzines and get together at conventions along with the writers, editors, publishers, and even SF academics. This unusually interactive relation is one of the things that distinguishes the genre from other forms of literature. The 1970s saw a growing group of feminist fans producing feminist SF fanzines and fighting for women-only spaces and feminist programming at conventions.

Russ often contributed to feminist fanzines and also spent considerable time trying to teach "Feminism 101" through letters to non-feminist, even sexist, fanzines. For more on Russ's activities in these fields, as well as studies of her fiction, see Farah Mendlesohn, ed., *On Joanna Russ* (Wesleyan University Press, 2009).

[Editors' note: Madison, Wisconsin, where *Feminist Collections* is published, is home to the "world's leading feminist science fiction convention," **WisCon**, each year. This year's dates are May 22–25, at the Concourse Hotel. See <http://www.wiscon.info.>]

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