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Spring 2024

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SFRA Review is an open access journal published four times a year by the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA) since 1971. *SFRA Review* publishes scholarly articles and reviews. As the flagship journal of SFRA, the *Review* is devoted to surveying the contemporary field of SF scholarship, fiction, and media as it develops.

Submissions

SFRA Review accepts original scholarly articles, interviews, review essays, and individual reviews of recent scholarship, fiction, and media germane to SF studies. Articles are single-blind peer reviewed by two of three general editors before being accepted or rejected. *SFRA Review* does not accept unsolicited reviews. If you would like to write a review essay or review, please contact the relevant review editor. For all other publication types—including special issues and symposia—contact the general editors. All submissions should be prepared in MLA 8th ed. style. Accepted pieces are published at the discretion of the editors under the author's copyright and made available open access via a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

SFRA Review History

SFRA Review was initially titled *SFRA Newsletter* and has been published since 1971, just after the founding of SFRA in 1970. The *Newsletter* changed its name to *SFRA Review* in 1992 with issue #194 to reflect the centrality of an organ for critical reviews of both fiction and scholarship to the SF studies community. The *Newsletter* and *wReview* were published 6 times a year until the early 2000s, when the *Review* switched to a quarterly schedule. Originally available only to SFRA members or sold per issue for a small fee, *SFRA Review* was made publicly available on the SFRA's website starting with issue #256. Starting with issue #326, the *Review* became an open access publication. In 2020, the *Review* switched to a volume/issue numbering scheme, beginning with 50.1 (Winter 2019). For more information about the *Review*, its history, policies, and editors, visit WWW.SFRAREVIEW.ORG.

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FROM THE EDITORS



Spring 2024

Ian Campbell

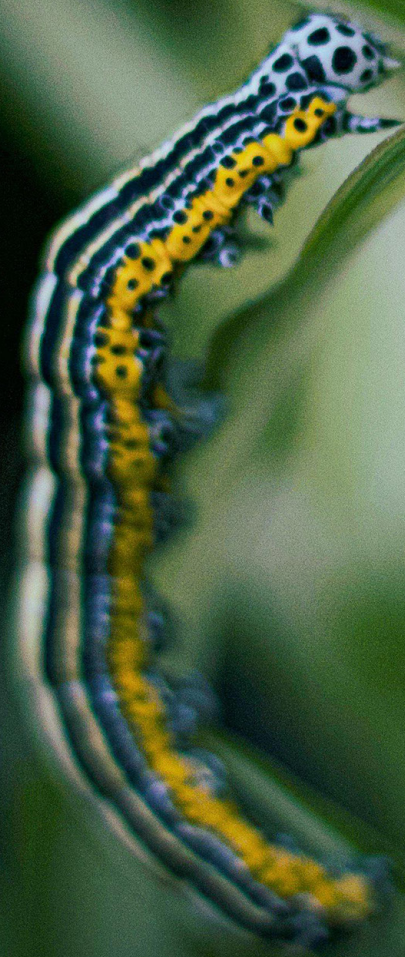


This is our shortest issue in quite a long time, due to some scheduling conflicts. We will return in August with a much fuller suite of features and articles. The end of the spring semester is a challenge for everyone who's academic-adjacent, including parents of children in elementary, middle and high schools. My own high-schooler is naturally anxious enough, but with a project or standardized test due every few days, she's really feeling the burnout so many of us do at this generally beautiful time of year.

My much-beloved parents are venerable enough to be almost a statistical anomaly by this point, and while they've been robust all along, time has really begun to catch up with both of them recently. For most of this month, my mother has been in a nursing home seventy miles from us, recovering from a femur broken in a fall, and my father, one of our last living WWII veterans, has been in a hospital fifty miles in a different direction, suffering from digestive issues relating to a bout of food poisoning. Neither has a smartphone, so I've spent many an hour going low-tech, with my daughter's phone in one hand and my own phone in the other, turned upside down so that my parents can speak to each other from their separate beds. I am an organic coupling device. They have been married since the 1950s.

SF enables me to think about what might be right around the corner: part of me would love to jump ahead not that far to the *San Junipero* universe, where both of them could be free of aches and pains and back to a time when "real people danced with a *partner*," in my father's oft-repeated words. But SF is as much about the social consequences of technological development as it is the tech itself, and that particular episode of *Black Mirror* needed to focus on the tech and the characters, so it hadn't the time to do much with the social issues. Imagine two great-great-grandchildren debating whether to stop paying for their ancestor's subscription. Imagine the digital hells from Iain M. Banks' *Surface Detail*. Imagine the world of the [story of Miguel Acevedo](#). I think I'd prefer to stick with *San Junipero*, because I'll still be able to talk with them, without needing two phones or a medium. Write me at icampbell@gsu.edu.

FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE



From the President

Hugh O'Connell



Continuing from last issue's column, I want to reach out about more ways to get involved at the organizational level of the SFRA. The daily (and yearly) tasks of the SFRA are largely carried out by the elected Executive Committee (comprised of the Immediate Past President, President, Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary, and two At-Large officers). Coming up later this summer into early fall, we'll be holding elections for the Vice President and Treasurer positions. If you are interested in either position, no prior experience is necessary. All we ask is for a candidate statement that outlines your interest in and vision for the position (previous candidate statements can be found [here](#)). We publish the candidate statements here in the SFRA Review in the summer and run the elections in the Fall.

SFRA Vice President (the VP serves 1 term of three years):

The Vice President does a lot to shape the makeup of the SFRA, as they have the special remit to work on recruitment. For example, over the last couple of years, the VP has instituted and run the Country Representative Program in order to help increase and grow the SFRA's international reach and influence. They've also been involved in shaping the annual conference through organizing DEI and Early Career Scholar presentations and workshops (and on this note, please see current VP Ida Yoshinaga's column in this issue). Through these efforts, the VP helps to build the membership while also fostering connections and points of contact across new and existing members. I'm copying the official by-law language for the VP below:

"The vice president shall be vested with all the powers and shall perform all the duties of the president during the absence of the latter and shall have such other duties as may, from time to time, be determined by the Executive Committee. At any meeting at which the president is to preside, but is unable, the vice president shall preside. The vice president shall have special responsibility for membership recruitment for the SFRA (working along with the secretary, the web director, and the outreach officer)."

SFRA Treasurer (the Treasurer can serve up to 2 terms at three years per elected term):

The second position of Treasurer holds a soft spot for me, as it's where I got my start serving on the Executive Committee. Alongside the usual tasks of making sure the bills are paid and lights kept on, one of the more rewarding aspects of the Treasurer position, in my experience, is in giving back to the membership through travel grants and other awards. Sometimes there is simply no better service work than giving people money. While it can sound daunting, because we are a relatively small organization, the Treasurer position requires no real experience with budgets or complex financial skills. I had no prior experience to draw on, and no one looking at my high

school and undergrad math grades would've ever expected me to occupy the role! I'm copying the official by-law language for the VP below:

“The treasurer shall be the chief financial officer of the association and have charge of all receipts and disbursements of the association and shall be the custodian of the association's funds. The treasurer shall have full authority to receive and give receipts for all monies due and payable to the association and to sign and endorse checks and drafts in its name and on its behalf. The treasurer shall deposit funds of the association in its name and such depositories as may be designated by the Executive Committee. The treasurer shall furnish the Executive Committee an annual financial report within 60 days of the fiscal year; the fiscal year shall end on December 31. At any meeting at which the president is to preside, but is unable, and for which the vice president and secretary are unable to preside, the treasurer shall preside.”

Of course, I'm just scratching the surface here, and if you have any questions about these positions, then please feel free to contact me (hugh.oconnell@umb.edu) or the current officers. We'll be happy to chat with you about any of the positions. Or alternately, if you're in Estonia for the conference, please feel free to find me to chat in person!

FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

From the Vice President

Ida Yoshinaga



Dear members, colleagues, and friends:

This May, the Science Fiction Research Association will host its first-ever Estonia meeting at the University of Tartu. We on the SFRA Executive Committee welcome registrants to two events especially.

Put together by our At-Large Representatives Helane Androne and Gabriela Lee, this year's professional-development workshop during the conference is for early-career scholars including graduate students, adjuncts, postdocs, and assistant professors:

"Application Anecdotes and Alternative Career Paths in SF/F"

Tuesday, May 7, 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m. CET; Jakobi 2-226 and via Zoom

Session description: What is the trajectory of a career in science fiction/fantasy? How have scholars navigated the journey from graduate school to the academy and beyond? What are the current appointment and/or collaborative options within the academy? How might we bridge the journey into other adjacent careers? How might we imagine and carve out opportunities for SF/F research within traditional programs and departments? Join us as we unpack this journey with several scholars who have recently secured positions in—and adjacent to—the academy.

This year's EC-sponsored DEI roundtable, on social-justice issues in our field, was organized by closing keynote Bogi Takács:

"DEI Roundtable: Transitions and Transformations"

Friday, May 10, 1:30-3:00 p.m. CET, Jakobi 2-226 and via Zoom

This is SFRA 2024's panel discussion on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI): everyone is welcome to attend. Together with our panelists, we intend to engage with topics that go beyond the usual introductory-level DEI discussion. As this year's theme is Transitions, we plan to explore changes in DEI over time. The following topics are just some of the points we aim to touch on: if equity increases or decreases, how can and should structural DEI supports change to adjust better to new situations? How does this apply to organizations like SFRA, conferences, the field in general? How can we cope with changes for the better—or for the worse? As definitions of DEI have been shifting—including attempts to extend the acronym—who might not still be included in them, and who are only nominally included? How can we strategize to work across differences both in our immediate environment and more broadly over the internet, and how can the global nature of our field aid or hinder us in this? Many marginalized people feel a skepticism

toward DEI, and this has extended to conference panels and convention events focusing on the topic. We plan to discuss what specific actions can such panels facilitate, and how they can enrich the lives of audiences and participants rather than focusing on providing basic education to outsiders, or an item on the agenda to complete.

Links to these hybrid events will be provided to registrants prior to the conference's start, and speaker names will be posted shortly on the website and via email.

Thank you Bogi, Gabriela, Helane, Jaak, and Lisanna for enriching our conference experience!

NON-FICTION REVIEWS



Image by sapolretan

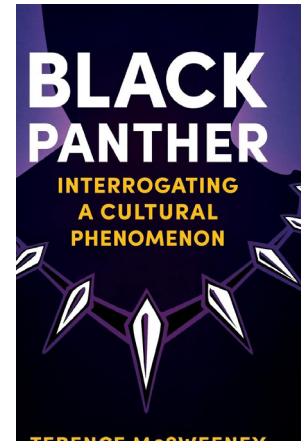
Black Panther: Interrogating a Cultural Phenomenon, by Terence McSweeney



Jeremy Brett

Terence McSweeney. *Black Panther: Interrogating a Cultural Phenomenon*.
Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022. Paperback, 254 pg. \$20.00.
ISBN 9781496836090.

An analysis or examination of the 2018 Marvel Cinematic Universe film *Black Panther* is a difficult proposition, since *Black Panther* is not simply another film: as Terence McSweeney tells us in the very subtitle of his study, it is an ongoing popular phenomenon that has touched the lives and hearts of millions of moviegoers. McSweeney opens his text with a quote from Carvell Wallace of *The New York Times*, in which Wallace states, “*Black Panther* is a defining moment for Black America” (3). That is no small thing for any cultural production, and a great deal of weight for a single film to bear. [It will be interesting to watch what happens now that the film’s sequel, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, has been released, sans the sadly late Chadwick Boseman as T’Challa, to see whether the BP franchise can sustain the first film’s level of personal and societal impact.]



However, as McSweeney makes clear, Wallace’s comment is more than justified, not just by the countless numbers of ecstatic and joyful comments from Africans and people of the African diaspora all around the world, nor by the fact that a massive cinematic franchise/cultural touchstone finally centered a film on a Black superhero, but by the complex societal layerings that constitute the film. As McSweeney states, “[t]his book places *Black Panther* alongside these texts” [other seminal films that have had a significant impact on the ways in which viewers react and respond to culture] “despite the fact that it is *just a superhero film*, proposing it should be considered first and foremost as a richly cultural artifact in ways similar to them, each of which have resonated with audiences and found themselves both *embedded* into and *impacted on* cultural discourse” (italics in original, 21). In a world in which superhero-centered media is (still!) frequently regarded as somehow *less* compared to other film genres, or as not “real” cinema (most prominently and infamously, perhaps, suggested by film legend Martin Scorsese), McSweeney makes a powerful case that *Black Panther* does not transcend superhero films as much as demonstrate those films’ capacity—given the proper combination of script, director, actors, and cultural considerations—to be sources of significant psychological and cultural resonance. Just as importantly, they may become sites in which viewers, especially those neglected or misrepresented in the past by studios, can see themselves, their cultures, and their humanity represented accurately and on center stage. This new concentration on diverse representation of people has

accelerated in the MCU in recent years, as Marvel Studios has been giving more prominence to female characters (*Captain Marvel*, *Black Widow*, *WandaVision*, *She-Hulk*), Muslims (*Ms. Marvel*), Native Americans (Echo in *Hawkeye*), Asians and Asian-Americans (*Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*) and LGBT characters (*The Eternals*), for example. However, arguably none of these efforts have had the same emotional resonance as *Black Panther*, and part of McSweeney's valuable study involves identifying the singular nature of *BP* in relation to American, African American, and African cultures. In the process, he also provides a well-constructed and thoughtful example of the scholarly value of analyzing a popular cultural text, especially one demonstrated to have lasting and powerful cultural impact.

One of the striking features of McSweeney's study is its structure. He rarely repeats himself or describes the film in a recursive fashion, returning to the same scene or scenes again and again. Instead, he manages the admirable feat of detailing several important themes while proceeding in a more-or-less straight fashion from the beginning of the movie to its conclusion. It's a refreshing method of writing a critical text that mirrors filmic chronology and, I think, lets insight build upon insight until the work's conclusion, where the totality of the critical observations really makes itself felt.

McSweeney tackles a number of facets of *BP*'s production and influence that taken together demonstrate with convincing arguments the cultural significance of the film. The study's first chapter explores the nature of Wakanda, placing *BP* firmly in the aesthetic and narrative traditions of Afrofuturism and African Futurism and showing how the film's creators and designers carefully (although some might argue superficially) work to present Wakanda as a diverse and earnest exploration of various African cultures and practices. (I appreciate also McSweeney's note that Wakanda is a powerful rebuke to white historians of the past who decried Africa as a place without history or civilization. One of the reasons for *Black Panther*'s emotional resonance has been its visual expression of a powerful and technologically advanced African nation, with a proud history and lively culture.) A second chapter looks at what might be an overlooked aspect of the film, namely its interaction with MCU and real-world geopolitics; again, he notes that Wakanda occupies a unique place in movie history. *Black Panther* "is a film that centralizes African culture, traditions, and characters in a way that no large-scale American film about the continent has ever done. Wakanda is a paradoxical construct in many ways: it is fictional, but it has real borders and relationships with other actual countries; it is not real, but its culture, architecture, and style are drawn from authentic African nations; and, finally, it is an imaginary creation, but this did not prevent it from possessing a tangible and affective symbolic power when the film was released in February 2018" (57). But in all the kudos for the film's groundbreaking nature, McSweeney takes care to point out the problematic features of the film, many of which reflect its American origins—these include the positive portrayal of CIA officer Everett Ross (Martin Freeman), a jarring character choice considering the real-life CIA's covert and undemocratic interference in the affairs of African nations. (One of the book's most thought-provoking observations, something I recall noticing when I originally saw the film, was that the movie makes the interesting choice

to make a white American intelligence operative one of the film heroes while making an African American (N’Jadaka, aka “Killmonger” [Michael B. Jordan]) whose stated desire is to empower Black people everywhere the ruthless villain. *Black Panther* is an interestingly layered movie from a racial point of view, and these sorts of dramatic decisions make the championing of the film more compellingly complex.

McSweeney devotes an entire chapter to N’Jadaka (and I note his decision to use the character’s given Wakandan name as a general rule, rather than referring to him as Killmonger, which is at once N’Jadaka’s nickname given him by his fellow US Army warriors and the name by which the character is called in countless reverent memes), seeking to analyze the fascination that much of the filmgoing audience has had with him. N’Jadaka is one of the most compelling and developed villains in the MCU, which accounts for much of his popularity. Betrayed as a young boy by his uncle T’Chaka (then the king of Wakanda), his story arc throughout the film is one of bitterness and revenge against the Wakandan royal family, but he is also driven by the desire to break Wakanda out of its self-isolation and take the lead in supporting Black people everywhere. (Is this policy ultimately a selfish, self-benefiting one, that ignores Wakandan responsibility to fellow Black people? It’s a question that the film leaves open to discussion, though it ultimately comes down on the side of increased Wakandan engagement as T’Challa appears before the United Nation to pronounce his nation’s arrival on the world stage.) McSweeney ably examines N’Jadaka’s contradictions (his attacks on colonizers while himself having the mentality of one, for example). At the same time, though, he points out the problematic point of *Black Panther* that “[i]n a genre that revels in violent altercations – indeed, one founded with violence as righteous and just – not only is *Black Panther* unable to endorse violence as emancipation for oppressed people all over the globe but it portrays the two men who would advocate it as villains, showing one to be in league with a terrorist like [Ulysses] Klaue and the other a sociopath that targets women on numerous occasions and will later advocate killing children” (113). The film’s relationship to “unacceptable” Black radicalism makes its image as a progressive film a bit muddier; this is not necessarily a criticism. In fact, these kinds of contradictions that McSweeney discusses in the book make *Black Panther* less a collection of flaws than a multidimensional production subject to numerous and equally valid reinterpretations. As McSweeney puts it, “[w]hat is clear is that *Black Panther* came to mean fundamentally paradoxical things to different individuals and groups, which, for some, might be regarded as evidence of its vacancy, but for others, of its fecundity” (177). The exploration of those opposing views and varying intensities of popular reception makes McSweeney’s very readable study particularly useful for film and popular culture scholars.

Further chapters explore other aspects of the film: one takes a deep dive into T’Challa’s progress from loyal son to a mature leader who changes direction and viewpoint based on newly lived experiences. Another examines the prominent role of women in the story, which for the MCU at the time was a major step forward and one away from earlier films that tended to sideline female characters. [This aspect of the film takes on even more significance now, in light of the sequel’s centering on T’Challa’s sister Shuri (Letitia Wright) and her assumption of the

role of Black Panther.] The concluding chapter looks at the film's relationship to the politics and sentiments of its time, and again to its cultural malleability. That conclusion proves, as does the rest of McSweeney's fascinating and thorough analysis, that *Black Panther*, whatever one's opinion of the film itself, carries deep emotional and cultural significance for audiences and thus signifies what may very well be a new stage and welcome evolution for superhero media.

Jeremy Brett is an Associate Librarian at Cushing Memorial Library & Archives, where he is the Curator of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Research Collection as well as Interim Curator of the Women's & Gender Studies and Area Studies Collections. He has also worked at the University of Iowa, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the National Archives and Records Administration-Pacific Region, and the Wisconsin Historical Society. He received his MLS and his MA in History from the University of Maryland – College Park in 1999. His professional interests include science fiction, fan studies, and the intersection of libraries and social justice.

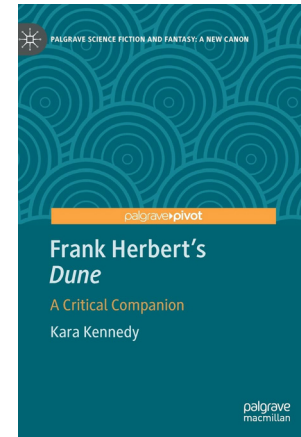
Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion, by Kara Kennedy



Leigha High McReynolds

Kara Kennedy. *Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon. Hardcover. xi + 113 pg. \$34.99. ISBN 9783031139345.

Many of us who read and write for this publication probably have the following in common: science fiction (and related genres) helps us think through abstract ideas, including literary theory. And I'd bet that many of us also share another common experience: we learned those literary theories from instructors who were themselves not familiar with science fiction, definitely not as a field of scholarship and maybe not even as fans. Kara Kennedy's most recent book, *Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion*, is the kind of book we needed, and I'm glad that now science fiction students and scholars will have access to this resource.



This companion was published as part of the relatively new series Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon, edited by Sean Guynes and Karen Omry. The series' goal is that "the books will provide an understanding of how students, readers, and scholars can think dynamically about a given text." Given the combination of *Dune's* reputation in science fiction history, broad disciplinary appeal, and allure for teen and young adult readers, offering this kind of companion text to the novel seems particularly apt.

What immediately stands out about the book is its accessibility. The writing style and language choices are straightforward and jargon-free: easily understood by an undergraduate reader, or even advanced high school students. Although it provides a comprehensive overview of the novel's themes, the book is short, less than 100 pages if you don't count the bibliography and index, making it less daunting for readers as well as more likely that they will take in the breadth of information covered. To facilitate that brevity and clarity, the book covers only the 1965 novel *Dune*, so potential readers do not feel as if they need to have read and watched a whole franchise. In addition, there are six original color illustrations by Arthur Wheelan, which lend a delightful whimsy to a discussion of a text that is often taken *very* seriously.

The structure of the book is also audience centered: it is divided into seven sections of about fifteen pages in length. Each section provides an overview of a related group of themes of the

novel and begins with an abstract and list of keywords. All of this would allow a novice scholar or lay-reader to easily read the whole text or find what might be useful to help them engage with the novel. Topics covered include: historical and biographical context, political and religious institutions, ecology and environmentalism, and women's agency. Two of the middle chapters stand out as offering attention to aspects of the novel that are under-theorized and misunderstood, respectively. Chapter Four analyzes the novel's attention to mind and consciousness, dramatized through access to hyperaware characters' interiority, in a world that, without computers, relies on heightened human consciousness. Chapter Five explores the protagonist Paul Atreides's complicated relationship to the heroic archetype and traditional masculinity. Kennedy explains that Paul's limitations and failures are part of Herbert's critique of charismatic leaders. This chapter is especially important for readers who have not continued with the series to understand one of *Dune*'s central messages. The final chapter suggests avenues for future scholarship and exploration including translation studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial theory: it's a call for future readers and scholars to create a robust body of knowledge that reflects the complexities and depth of the novel. At the end of the book is an extensive bibliography valuable for any *Dune* scholars, containing all significant works published on *Dune* up through 2022, and including several listed as forthcoming that were published after this book went to print.

If the book has a unifying claim, it's that *Dune* played a significant role in the science fiction genre's shift from stories driven by technology to a focus on people and the institutions they create. This is a result of the complexity of Herbert's world-building, which is unpacked through the seven chapters. Ultimately, the book highlights the continued relevance of *Dune*'s themes and world-building to current life.

Given the book's accessibility and its work to overview, rather than make an argument about, *Dune*, it's ideal for undergraduate and graduate students, and advanced high school students, preparing to work on the novel for the first time: particularly for students working with the novel outside of a science fiction studies class. However, the overview could be useful to experienced readers and scholars looking to consider the many facets of the novel and possible directions scholarship might take. Teachers getting ready to teach *Dune* could find it valuable both as a preparatory and a secondary assigned source.

Kara Kennedy's *Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion* is part of an exciting larger trend in *Dune* scholarship which likely gained momentum from the 2021 Villeneuve film adaptation. This includes Kennedy's previous book *Women's Agency in the Dune Universe* in 2021; the first edited collection of academic work on *Dune*, *Discovering Dune*, in 2022; and a second *Dune and Philosophy*, also out in 2022. And we can expect another round of publications with Villeneuve's *Dune: Part 2* scheduled for release in November 2023 as the movies bring more attention to the source material. Given this revival, Kennedy's *Critical Companion* will fill an important role in bringing new readers and scholars into the conversation. While the choice to focus only on the 1965 novel is an asset, I hope we will eventually see a critical companion volume like this for the franchise, potentially including the screen adaptations.

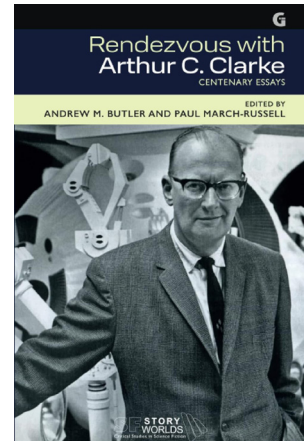
Leigha High McReynolds, PhD is currently an Assistant Clinical Professor for the University Honors Program at the University of Maryland, College Park where she teaches classes on genetics and disability in science fiction. Most recently, she published a chapter on eugenics in *Dune* in *Discovering Dune* (McFarland 2022). You can also read her work at *LARB*, *Ancillary Review of Books*, and *Tor.com*. She offers classes on speculative fiction for the local D.C. bookstore, Politics and Prose and is a regular presenter at WorldCon. You can find her on LinkedIn and Twitter [@LeighaMcR](#).



Rendezvous with Arthur C. Clarke: Centenary Essays, edited by Andrew M. Butler and Paul March-Russell

Jerome Winter

Andrew M. Butler and Paul March-Russell, eds. *Rendezvous with Arthur C. Clarke: Centenary Essays*. Gylphi Limited, 2022. SF Storyworlds: Critical Studies in Science Fiction Series. Paperback. 306 pg. \$40.00. ISBN 9781780241081.



Andrew M. Butler and Paul March-Russell, the editors of this new collection by leading scholars of Arthur C. Clarke, begin with a riposte to the still pervasive marginalization of genre work in literary studies and culture at large. In a 1998 article for *The Village Voice*, Jonathan Lethem, a supremely genre-savvy writer, famously offered a broadside in which he characterized Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* as “reactionary SF as artistically dire as it was comfortingly familiar” (qtd. in Butler and Russell 1). If *Rendezvous with Rama* had lost its Nebula Award to Thomas Pynchon's also-nominated *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973, Lethem facetiously conjectures that, then, the New Wave experiments of the SF genre would have at last escaped their commercial straitjackets, and the SF genre as a basic category of fiction would have evaporated with a collective sigh of “good riddance.”

Butler and March-Russell bristle at Lethem's tendentious dismissal of Clarke's brand of hard-SF fiction, but, more substantively, they challenge the equally unquestioned conventional binary that seeks to oppose a virtuosic genre-hybridizing and postmodern writer such as Thomas Pynchon to a less flamboyant innovator like Arthur C. Clarke who wrote, at least superficially, from within genre constraints. Indeed, with this impressively informed and diverse collection of essays that began at a 2017 centenary conference memorializing Clarke's birth in 1917, Butler and March-Russell make a convincing case that the broad range and intricate subtlety of Clarke's deep veins of literary-SF ore have yet to be critically assayed, let alone sufficiently mined. In their introduction, Butler and March-Russell argue that it is impossible not to read Clarke as a “*homo duplex*, a perpetually two-sided and enigmatic figure” (7). Indeed, the deeper and more carefully a reader looks, the more the lucid simplicity of Clarke's career concerns seems to be, on closer reflection, a mysterious bundle of contradictions.

One of the overlooked ways in which Pynchon and Clarke are surprisingly likeminded is their obsession with fictively overcoming the inexorable laws of physics, such as gravity or entropy. Noting that the Overlords in *Childhood's End* (1953) both fly and manipulate gravity, Thore Bjørnvig traces Clarke's literary pedigree to the long tradition of eschatological and

apocalyptic writing that levitates the future of humanity upward to disruptive visions of radical progress. Jim Clarke then picks up this fundamental paradox of Clarke's rational-fantastic fiction to explore Clarke's debt to what Clarke himself called his own unique blend of "crypto-Buddhist" metaphysics. Likewise, in "Clarkaeology," Patrick Parrinder argues that even though Clarke's fiction seems to be "strikingly forward-looking" (35), it also evinces a powerful sense of "belatedness," betraying a keen interest in archeological theories about the diffusion of cultures, especially in the fascination with megaliths and obelisks.

Developing this critical analysis of Clarke's unique twists on future histories, co-editor Paul March-Russell, in his own contribution to the collection, performs a close reading of *The City and the Stars* (1956) to argue that Lee Edelman's notion of queer futurity can help readers understand how Clarke subtly subverts the common assumption that this prototypically hard-SF writer implicitly champions technological and imperial (galactic) progress. Similarly, connecting Clarke to Robert Heinlein's movie tie-in *Destination Moon* (1950), the Russian SF writer Pavel Klushantsev, and the British SF writer E.C. Tubb, Andy Sawyer's chapter argues that Clarke avoids straightforward propagandizing for Cold War ideology. Sawyer, though, cautions that Clarke wrote for an audience composed largely of technocrats and fans, and Clarke therefore soberly appeals to the power of scientific explanations and regularly evokes the sublimity of the cosmos, even if he also undercuts these semi-heroic gestures.

Another chapter that concerns itself with excavating the queerness in Clarke's oeuvre would be Mike Stack's "Clarke Dare Speak Not Its Name," which explores the futuristic normative bisexuality of *Imperial Earth* (1975) against the illuminating historical backdrop of the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in the UK. In an essay that is equally attentive to textual details, co-editor Andrew Butler, drawing on theories of Freud, Heidegger, Haraway, and Derrida, explicates Clarke's representations of tools in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *2010: Odyssey Two* (1982) as not only empowering prosthetic enhancements but also as unsettling posthuman transformations. With an emphasis on Clarke's uncertain mixture of skeptical deflation and heady enthusiasm entirely in keeping with this nuanced volume, Helen M. Rozwadowski discusses Clarke's writings and life of active undersea diving to show how Clarke probes the limits the frontier analogy for both sea and space.

This collection also incisively focuses on Clarke's legacy with one chapter by Lyu Guangzhao on Clarke's influence on Liu Cixin and contemporary Chinese SF, and one chapter by Joseph S. Norman on Clarke's influence on Iain M. Banks and New Space Opera. Nick Hubble's final chapter on the history of the Clarke Award and how the award has become more controversially unpredictable and less narrowly restrictive in its selective criteria over the years suggests the more or less consensus view today, in China Mieville's clever pronouncement, that "any sufficiently advanced science fiction is indistinguishable from literature" (qtd. in Hubble 236). This chapter is a fitting conclusion to the volume as it revisits the dismantling of the problematic binary between SF and mimetic literature that the other important contributions to Clarke scholarship contained in this collection also consistently upend. This wide-ranging, insightful, and often scrupulously

evenhanded collection would serve equally well SF novitiates, veteran Clarke scholars, and those interested more broadly in the contested boundaries between genre and mainstream fiction.

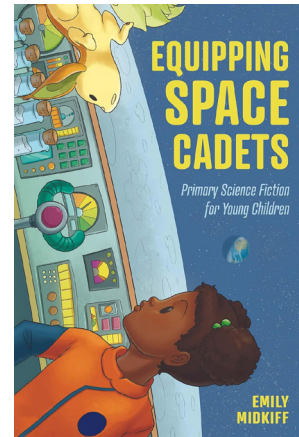
Jerome Winter is an SF scholar who studies literary space opera, citizen science, and pedagogy. His most recent published book is a critical introduction to the *Mass Effect* videogame series as an innovative iteration of space-opera narrative.

Equipping Space Cadets: Primary Science Fiction for Young Children, by Emily Midkiff



Bruce Lindsley Rockwood

Emily Midkiff. *Equipping Space Cadets: Primary Science Fiction for Young Children*. UP of Mississippi, 2022. Childrens Literature Association Series. Hardcover. 218 pg. \$99.00, ISBN 9781496839022. Paperback. 218 pg. \$30.00, ISBN 9781496839015. Kindle E-Book. 211 pg. \$30.00. ISBN 1496839013.



At a time when disputes—whether political, cultural, or merely pedagogical—are growing over what literature should be available to children in pre-K through primary school, and the very idea of encouraging librarians, teachers (and parents) to read aloud from, teach with, or make available to children picture books and early readers that challenge or encourage interest in science (much less science fiction!), especially for girls and diverse readers, Emily Midkiff has undertaken an arduous effort to address this challenge. Her goals are straightforward: to identify categories of picture books and early readers that exemplify ‘quality’ sf; assess how widely sf is available and read by or to children in our schools; to show how young readers are ready for, and appreciate, what she seeks to identify as “quality primary” age sf; and to encourage writers, publishers, and acquisitions professionals in the value of the production and promotion of quality primary sf. (5-8) Wider availability of such texts will better prepare younger readers to transition to more complex sf texts when they reach and exceed the storied “golden age” of 12 so often referred to in superficial discussions of who is “ready for” the genre. (18)

In her introduction, Midkiff discusses the example of a publisher’s initial reluctance to have Jon Scieszka include “too much science” in his sf series that starts with book 1, *Frank Einstein and the Antimatter Robot* (2014). (3-4) She points out that the book’s text and detailed illustrations include “the sort of plausible explanations found in sf for adults.” (3) Usefully, her close reading of this text includes excerpts from the illustrations in this book (6) and examples of intertext references contained in the story that will ring true to adult readers and primary age children who are exposed to movies, television, and other cultural markers of sf themes. For example Frank is shown “reading a copy of Asimov’s *I, Robot* when Grampa Al asks to know what he is working on” (4).

Midkiff argues that “sf for preadolescent children... is often approached with the belief... that scientific extrapolation and speculation in fiction are beyond most children’s abilities or interests”

(5). Her book argues in essence that this is *not* true, and she supports this assertion with three interdisciplinary case studies (Chapter 4) to show that primary sf does exist, much of it fits her definition of quality, is appreciated when available, can provoke lively reactions and discussions when presented to small groups of children, and deserves wider acceptance and promotion. Her argument is that the “dismissal of primary sf is fueled by largely ungrounded beliefs about children, science, and genre.” (5) The case studies are a School Library circulation survey of books checked out in all fields, as coded by Midkiff from records submitted (105-117), which tends to show that primary sf while underrepresented in collections, is more likely to be checked out multiple times than other fiction; a survey of librarians and teachers, 59 of whom responded to the survey request concerning whether they recommended or made use of primary sf in class; (117-129) and a small group read-aloud exercise of several stories where she read to children with parental consent, recorded the event and analyzed the responses of the children to the texts and each other’s comments (130-151).

Chapter 1 of the book commences with a review of two related questions: “What is Children’s Literature?” (9-12) and “What is Science Fiction?” (12-16), followed by an integration of the two: “What is Primary Science Fiction?” (17-27), and a “Guide” to identifying primary sf (27-30). This is applied to “The Case of Robots” (30-35), with a close textual analysis of Rian Sias’s *Zoe and Robot: Let’s Pretend* (2011). Midkiff usefully compares claims, arguments and examples from Brian Aldiss, John Clute, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Grace Dillon, A. Waller Hastings, and in particular Farah Mendlesohn’s *The Intergalactic Playground* (2009) to lay out the scholarly critical background for her investigation of her theme, the value of primary sf.

She condenses this chapter into a three-part test to determine whether primary sf can be said to be ‘quality’: “1. Is there a speculative ‘what if’ question or extrapolative ‘if this, then what?’ question to the story? 2. Does the ending imply that something has changed in the world or that new possibilities have opened due to the events of the story, however small? 3. Would the story’s plot, themes or lesson be different if you replaced the sf components of the story with something realistic or magical?” (30)

Chapter 2 addresses the general question of how readers read and interpret science fiction generally, discusses the “processes and protocols of reading sf” (37-42), and applies them to the forms of early childhood literature such as board books, popup books, picturebooks, early readers and so forth. She applies the “reader response theory of reading first described by Louise Rosenblatt” to how children read sf (37), and cites the work of Darko Suvin, Orson Scott Card, and David Hartwell to discuss how the “sf intertext includes far more than just books” and provides a cultural foundation to facilitate children understanding and appreciating the themes and stories of sf texts (38-39). Her investigations show that “widely consumed reboots of *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who*” and more prepare young children to successfully read and relate to sf (39). As for all reading instruction, Midkiff notes that “high-quality primary sf offers support---or ‘scaffolding’---for young readers, ensuring that sf is accessible to children of various skill levels and backgrounds,” citing the work of Jerome Bruner and Lev Vygotsky (42). She applies a close reading

of Chris Gall's *There's Nothing to Do on Mars* (2008), showing how the pictures provide context and meaning that challenges the text, and how the book "pushes back against the idea that sf and children's fiction have conflicting patterns, and the text/picture tension is critical to that message." (50-51) As another example she cites David Wiesner's picturebooks *Flotsam* (2006) and *June 29, 1999* (1992) (51-53), the latter one of the books she used in her read-aloud case study to assess how children react to a text in real time (132-145).

Chapter 3 focuses on "Reading Representation," addressing the various ways in which primary sf, and particularly early childhood sf, tends in recent decades to provide more representation of, and opportunity for self-recognition of themselves, in girls and diverse communities than in children's literature generally. She cites Lisa Yaszek's observation that sf has always been "naturally compatible with the project of Feminism" (70). Midkiff notes the conservative complaints about the Hugo awards to N.K. Jemisin for her *Broken Earth* trilogy, which was perceived as somehow a threat to genre sf (70), but argues that primary sf is "in in the direst need of attention to diversity" (71). Using the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/>, as a resource, she shows the low percent of the 4035 children's books of all sorts published in 2019 that feature Black/African, Asian, Latinx, Pacific Islanders, Arab, or Indigenous characters. Female characters are also underrepresented. Her own research shows that "High-quality, diverse primary sf books already exist, but they are not getting nearly enough critical attention or support" (72), citing the 357 primary sf books she identified in her study (87). Appendix A identifies the 357 primary sf books from the 1920s to the 2010s to support her analysis (157-178). Pros and cons of several representative stories are discussed, including Deborah Underwood and Meg Hunt's *Interstellar Cinderella* (2015): "The mechanical engineering aspect of the story is sidelined in favor of the fractured fairy tale" (74). In contrast, Ben Hatke's *Zita the Spacegirl* (2010) is seen to "satisfy several girl-friendly aspects in conjunction with speculation" (75). She reprints several pages of illustrations from the book to illustrate her explanation (76-77). Other examples include *A Wrinkle in Time: The Graphic Novel* (2015), and Ryan Sias's *Zoe and Robot: Let's Pretend!* (2011).

Midkiff then discusses "Alternative Futurisms and Primary Science Fiction" (83-91), exploring the potential for more diverse primary sf, acknowledging a few positive representative examples, while acknowledging their limitations. She explains: "To examine the extent of diversity in these books, I coded them into two categories proposed by Lee Galda et.al. in *Literature and the Child*: painted faces and culturally rich." The former refers to a story that offers "visual cues of diversity" which may not otherwise impact the story line, while culturally rich stories have "a nonmainstream culture or identity... integral to the story." (87) She argues it is not enough to have "painted faces" representing diverse characters in illustrations, the stories themselves should be culturally rich to enhance young readers of all backgrounds engagement with the text (87-88). One positive if rare example given is Cathy Camper and Raul the Third's graphic novel *Lowriders in Space* (2014), discussed in detail with reprinted illustrations. (89-93) The only primary sf discussed in her data set that features a Native American character is Adam Rex's hybrid novel *The True Meaning of Smekday* (2007) (97-100). There is a Pearson statistical analysis of the correlation

of gender, diversity and sf quality in the books in Midkiff's data set (91 and Appendix A) which shows "quality is slightly correlated with female characters and not reliably correlated with diversity" (91). I appreciate the attempt here to provide statistical rigor to what is essentially an impossible task, and the effort here provides a template for future scholarship in the field.

The book concludes with two Appendices providing documentation of her sources and evaluations. Appendix A describes and lists the 357 texts she "read and analyzed for this study" covering works from the 1920s to the present (157-178). Books included were limited in three ways: they had to meet the definition of sf she provides in Chapter 1; be significantly illustrated to meet her emphasis on early primary readers as the target of her research; and her decision that there could be no more than 3 books in the same series (157). Books were grouped as Picturebooks, Early Readers, Comic Books, Graphic Novels, or Hybrid Novels. Each was evaluated for quality (Yes/No: was Speculation and/or Extrapolation encouraged by the text?); whether they had female primary characters; and whether they promoted diversity by either of the broad categories discussed in Chapter 3: "painted face," "culturally rich," or none (161). Appendix B (179-186) contains a list of suggested recommended quality sf texts in the age appropriate categories she identifies. The book concludes with end notes (187-190), works cited (191-199) and an index (201-206).

Having read aloud a great many board and picture books over 50 years, many of them fantasy or sf, to our four children and our grandchildren, and as the son of one librarian and being married to a children's librarian/early childhood educator, I was initially inclined to doubt her hypothesis that primary sf is not widely available or promoted. I thought of earlier Jon Scieszka books such as *The Time Warp Trio* series, with its own TV series spin-off, <https://www.timewarptrio.com/>, *The Enormous Egg* by Oliver Butterworth (1956), *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet* (1954) by Eleanor Cameron, and the Danny Dunn series of adventures by Raymond Abrashkin and Jay Williams, all of which have useful illustrations, are aimed at younger readers, and address science fiction tropes, as a few examples not mentioned in her book. And then there are, in addition to school libraries, other means of exposing children to sf she might explore to expand her sense of the contemporary reach of primary sf, such as the Bruce Coville and other books many children are offered in Scholastic Books Club newsletters and school book fairs over many years. See: <https://clubs.scholastic.com/home> [Although censorship of their offerings is creeping into what schools in some states can now offer; see: <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/17/1206219484/scholastic-book-fair-diversity-book-bans> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/25/us/scholastic-book-fair-race-gender.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>] The omission of some of these authors and potential resources suggests that there is more sf (quality or otherwise) available to younger children than Midkiff may realize. On the other hand, school and town libraries have limited space and budgets, and books get worn out and deaccessioned, so some of the books I'm familiar with, as well as those discussed by Midkiff, may not be readily available. We are agreed that there is a need for more willing and eager young readers, and that this can be supported by more quality primary sf being written and published.

Midkiff's book should be included in the libraries of schools of education, and considered by public and school librarians as they review their acquisition policies and make more invitations to authors to visit for book talks in the children's room. It matters.

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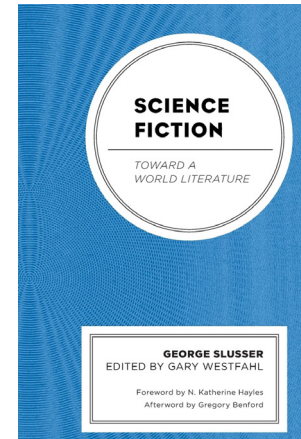
Science Fiction: Toward a World Literature, by George Slusser



Michael Larson

George Slusser. *Science Fiction: Toward a World Literature*. Edited by Gary Westfahl. Lexington Books, 2022. Hardcover. 350 pg. \$120.00 ISBN 9781666905359.

The eminent science fiction critic and long-time curator of the Eaton Collection of Science Fiction and Fantasy George Slusser died in 2014, leaving behind multiple versions of a manuscript about the history and development of science fiction. Gary Westfahl, Slusser's former colleague at the University of California, Riverside, compiled and revised these materials into this posthumous volume, which, barring any major archival discoveries, marks Slusser's final contribution to the field he dedicated his career to.



Like Adam Roberts's *The History of Science Fiction* (2006) and Brian W. Aldiss and David Wingrove's *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (1973), this project aims not merely to define science fiction in a new way, but to locate the historical origins of the genre. After a brief introduction, the first chapter traces the emergence of science fiction, and, although Slusser does not go back as far as Roberts, who sees even Greek epics as a kind of proto-science fiction, both critics understand the Reformation as a key moment in the development of the genre.

Employing Isaac Asimov's definition of science fiction as a "branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon human beings" ("Social Science Fiction"), Slusser identifies a series of scientific revolutions that swept across Europe and the United States beginning in the 17th century, which would go on to shape key proto-science fiction texts. For Slusser, the story begins in France, where the anti-clerical rationalism of François Rabelais passes through Michel de Montaigne to René Descartes, whose *Discourse on the Method* (1637) represents the first of a series of scientific paradigm shifts. Slusser argues that this advancement had an impact on French writing, producing a unique form of fiction, first visible in Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1670), with its fictional concepts of the "human condition" and the "thinking reed," which Slusser identifies as "the first genuine works of science fiction" (25). From there, we move to Germany, where the paradigm shift brought about by Immanuel Kant's influence, especially his "synthetic *a priori*," influenced E.T.A. Hoffman's "Der Sandmann" (1815). Interestingly, it is only after identifying these Continental origins that Slusser turns to British literature.

Unlike many English-language critics, Slusser sees British literature as reflecting the impact of Francis Bacon's "new science" at a relatively late moment. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), which is often cited as the first work of science fiction, is brushed aside for taking a posture that is "quite traditional in stigmatizing science" (39). Instead, Slusser identifies H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) as the first British work of fiction that shows science—in this case, the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859)—impacting human activity. The final paradigm shift occurs in the United States, stemming from the philosophical innovations of Ralph Waldo Emerson, although this is only arrived at toward the end of the text, after the key characteristics of science fiction have been investigated.

The middle chapters take up particular themes and markers of the genre. For Slusser, key attributes include the scientist as protagonist, a quest for intellectual liberty, seminal objects or inventions that play a key role in the narrative, and a story in some way concerned with humanity's advancement towards a transcendent transhumanism, best exemplified by J.D. Bernal's *The World, the Flesh, the Devil: An Enquiry into the Three Enemies of the Rational Soul* (1929). As with Roberts, Slusser sees space travel as a key setting for science fictional narrative, although his treatment of this subject primarily serves to underline the difference between the Anglo and French science fiction traditions, the latter of which he sees as bound up with the Cartesian conception of the cogito; although French travelers board rocketships and submersibles, just like their British counterparts, more often than not their journeys are actually explorations of a mental space that is simply reflected in the *res extensa*.

Throughout these investigations, Slusser does not shy away from controversy, and a number of established theorists and traditions come in for a heaping of criticism. Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) can only "conjure the old specter of the human form grotesquely distorted, stillborn" (211), while China Miéville's work is "a personal form of urban fantasy whose purpose, it seems, is to confound genre readers while delighting critics" (288). Marxism and Marxist theory are viewed in a skeptical light, and deconstructionism is frowned upon.

Of course, a critical lens can be also applied to Slusser's text, and when it is, one begins to wonder about the meaning of "world literature," a term that seems to define the manuscript even as it is never itself defined. A reader might be forgiven for observing that a series of national, European, science fiction traditions are interrogated, with minimal description of the significant interactions between them until the final chapters. In addition, some readers might echo the criticism of the original reviews of the manuscript, whom Westfahl reports requested extensive revisions because the book "was devoting too much attention to authors and texts that were not really part of the genre of science fiction" (xi). Although Westfahl sees exactly this as Slusser's innovation, some scholars may question the usefulness of giving so much attention to certain classics of European literature and philosophy—Descartes, Pascal, Kant, Aristotle, Balzac—in a study of science fiction.

However, on balance, even scholars who are not prepared to sign onto Slusser's account of the history of science fiction are likely to find his efforts to understand the genre from a more international perspective to be worthwhile. Slusser's thorough examination of non-Anglo traditions, especially French science fiction, will be edifying for those who are accustomed to thinking of science fiction as an exercise primarily conducted in English. Crucially, in the book's conclusion, Slusser engages fruitfully with writing from India, China, Israel, East Germany, Romania, and other terrains of "Global SF" (286). Along with the aforementioned volumes by Roberts and Aldiss and Wingrove, *Science Fiction: Toward a World Literature* makes a valuable contribution to the critical understanding of science fiction's origins and is a worthy capstone to a vaunted career.

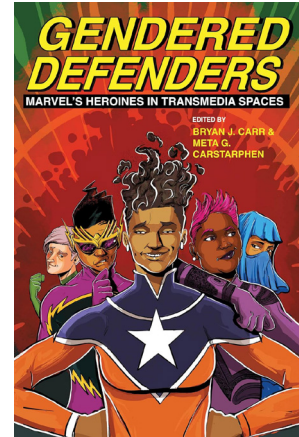
Michael Larson is a visiting assistant professor at Keio University. He completed his PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and received a Fulbright Grant to research the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami in Japan, later writing a nonfiction account of the disaster *When the Waves Came: Loss, Recovery, and the Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami* (Chin Music Press 2020). His current research focuses on science fiction and utopian studies and has been published in *Poetics Today* and *Utopian Studies*. In 2020, he received a three-year Young Researcher Grant from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces, edited by Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen



Jeremy Brett

Bryan J. Carr & Meta G. Carstarphen, eds. *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Trans-media Spaces*. New Suns: Race, Gender, and Sexuality. Columbus, OH: The Ohio University Press, 2022. Paperback. 216 pg. \$36.95. ISBN 9780814258521.



Scholarly, analytical works such as *Gendered Defenders* demonstrate that, despite opinions in some quarters (including the already tiresome Internet hot takes about being “so exhausted by all the comic book movies”), superheroes have significant cultural value. They produce emotional attachments among their readers and viewers, and they truly do *mean* something to people. For generations, media consumers have seen their own desires for heroism and goodness reflected in Superman, their own psychological darkneses and conflicts in Batman, their identities as social outcasts and misfits in the X-Men, their belief in love and justice triumphant and the power of a female warrior in Wonder Woman, their frustration with the foibles and troubles of everyday living in Spider-Man, their joy and pride in the heroic Black experience in Black Panther. Whatever their origins, Earthly or cosmic, superheroes are part of our shared human identity. Carr and Carstarphen quote comic writer Grant Morrison in their book’s introduction, noting that Morrison speculates “that the superhero (regardless of gender) holds significant psychic resonance in a world without an optimistic view of the future, providing the reader a surrogate ‘spiritual leadership’; the best superheroines, for all their supernatural exploits, are connected to universal human experiences” (4). One of those experiences is that of gender, and thus *Gendered Defenders* was brought into being to examine how the Marvel Cinematic Universe has dealt with this most fundamental of human conditions and identities. The fact that the MCU does so, and that its varying treatment of superheroines has produced high levels of both dizzying excitement and high dudgeon (much of the latter inspired by Internet trolls), suggests the ongoing relevance of superhero media to the lived experiences of people. As the editors note, “[p]opular culture has value and power because it can be a conduit through which an individual adapts and forms their own identity...as well as a means of finding commonality and relationships with others and metaphors that provide strength and catharsis in one’s own life” (5).

The MCU looms particularly large in this ongoing phenomenon because of its highly visible and entrenched cultural presence. The MCU is one of the grandest examples of what Henry

Jenkins calls ‘transmedia storytelling,’ a form of media production that involves using multiple channels of adaptation (films, comic books, novels, cartoons, games, and other tie-in products) to tell the integrated story of an integrated fictional world across both overlapping and separate narratives. (The editors note that the MCU, of course, is more problematic than traditionally reinvented and reimagined worlds such as the Arthurian cycle, because it is a wholly corporate owned- and directed product geared towards market share and profits at least as much as towards telling new or reinterpreted stories.) How the MCU portrays female characters has significant cultural impact, and—in the book’s core conceit—the evolution of Marvel superheroines over time “mirrors the development, struggles, and triumphs of women in the real world” (7). The MCU does not stand apart from the greater movements of human society, but gives us a reimagined mythology through which to view their evolution. There is great importance in that, and Carr and Carstarphen, in bringing together scholarly essays of thoughtfulness and deep social consideration, demonstrate that superheroines are not mere cultural confections or vehicles for selling toys, but are windows through which we might view ourselves and our treatment of gender.

The book’s opening section, with three essays by the editors, sets the stage, presenting the overall thesis as well as necessary context for understanding how Marvel has portrayed women in its past, and a call to examine Marvel heroines through the lens of a trans/linear feminism (a conceptual model coined by Carstarphen that allows for female agency to pass beyond traditional constraints in progressive personal journeys, obviating the old style master linear narrative). With all these considerations in mind, the majority of the essays in the book involve examinations and critiques of specific Marvel heroines and their relationships to expressions and emanations of power. J. Richard Stevens and Anna C. Turner analyze Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel), the first MCU heroine to be the center of her own film; the essay notes Carol’s evolving image (and problematic portrayals at times) over the decades in comics and her reworking into a figure of positive feminism in the 2019 film (and the comic books beyond, as part of the MCU transmedia experience) in which Carol takes control of her own past and her own identity. The book’s final essay also concerns Carol, examining her character via feminist trauma theory and characterizing her film as a trauma narrative that carries her from trauma to recovery to empowerment. Kathleen M. Turner Ledgerwood looks at the character of Agent Peggy Carter (the first MCU heroine to lead a television show) through the analytical lens of ‘standpoint feminist theory,’ that is, the framework that examines society from the points of view of women (as a marginalized group) in their everyday worlds and the ways in which women socially construct those worlds – it’s a particularly relevant frame for looking at Peggy, a character we see navigating her way through the white male-dominated and intensely gender-divided workplaces of the 1940s and evolving to connect viewers to subsequent waves of feminist thought and action. Amanda K. Kehrberg studies the complicated figure of Jessica Jones and the ways in which Jessica visually and vocally subverts and refuses not only the traditional hero role but the traditional binary concept of gender, particularly through her use (or NON-use) of the superhero costume.

In her essay, Rachel Grant examines the character of Shuri, T'Challah's sister and the leader of her native Wakanda's scientific endeavors. Shuri is an active example of an Afrofuturist counternarrative that prioritizes the heroism of intelligence and future thinking and promotes anti-colonialist (very explicitly, in Shuri's case—viewers of *Black Panther* in the theater will well recall the many excited responses by audience members to her use of the term “colonizer” when speaking to white CIA agent Ross) structures and viewpoints. Grant notes that Shuri “defies gender stereotypes of Black women” and is “a role model that empowers women to be smart and innovative in fields dominated by the patriarchy” (102). Maryanne A. Rhett deftly analyzes Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel) as a new type of cosmopolitan, even global, heroine, who embodies multiple and overlapping identities (woman, Muslim, teenager, feminist, daughter), none of which dominate her character but all of which define her in different ways. In an unusually constructed piece, Stephanie L. Sanders uses the character of police officer and cyborg Misty Knight to represent the possibilities for Black women to be change agents in dismantling unjust systems and presents Misty herself as a source of intersectionality “where gender, race, and power relations are hypervisible” (132).

Julia A. Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus look at the character of Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), the first MCU heroine, her status as an “outsider” hero (as a Slav on a primarily American team of heroes and as a hero operating within a secret world of espionage) and her sometimes problematic depiction as a physically objectified figure. Mildred F. Perrault and Gregory P. Perrault examine Pepper Potts, her evolving role/increased presence in the MCU across a close reading of multiple examples of Marvel transmedia (films, animated TV, comics, video games), and how her gender and gender roles have been performed in these various media. And Carrielynn D. Reinhard presents a careful and complex analysis of the character Squirrel Girl (who has not yet appeared in an MCU film, though I remain hopeful) that centers on the various ways in which transmedia storytelling can affect and complicate the development and portrayal of a character. Squirrel Girl is a positive character, promoting dialogue over confrontation and friendly diplomacy over fighting, and who focuses on intelligence, friendship, and female empowerment. In doing so she embodies multiple iterations of feminism and the contradictions therein, but Reinhard suggests that the nature of her corporate transmedia existence allows her to reflect and express feminist values but never truly seek to subvert systems of power.

Gendered Defenders is a wonderfully varied collection of thought on a wonderfully varied collection of heroines, and it is a welcome addition to the body of scholarly study of superhero media. [I do admit that I was surprised not to see an essay on Wanda Maximoff, whose journey from *Avengers: Age of Ultron* through *WandaVision*, I think, would make for a fascinating examination of female trauma and power.] If it suffers at all, it is only because, of course, it must inevitably fall behind as the MCU marches on and characters continue to grow and change, and new ones to be introduced. It would be interesting to see how some of the writers might change their conclusions in light of new MCU developments: for example, Peggy Carter becoming an alternate Captain America, or Shuri becoming the new Black Panther. New series like *Hawkeye*

(featuring Kate Bishop) or *She-Hulk* (with Jennifer Walters) have brought new iterations of superheroines to our attention and express new directions that Marvel is moving in with respect to its female heroes. A sequel to this volume—a *Gendered Defenders 2*—would not only be thematically appropriate to studying a transmedia universe fueled by sequels but would provide new and welcome insights into the continuing evolution of the vitally significant cultural figure of the superheroine.

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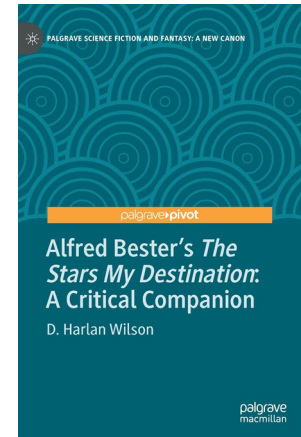
Alfred Bester's The Stars My Destination: A Critical Companion, by D. Harlan Wilson



Michael Pitts

D. Harlan Wilson. *Alfred Bester's The Stars My Destination: A Critical Companion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon. Hardcover. 135 pg. \$49.99. ISBN 978-3030969455.

The *Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon* series sets out, as described by its editors, to rethink science fiction and challenge traditional “notions of the canon, so long associated with privilege, power, class, and hegemony” (v). In pursuit of these goals, the series posits two key questions in relation to the specific texts under consideration: “*Why does this text matter to SFF?*” and “*Why does (or should) this text matter to SFF readers, scholars, and fans?*” (v-vi). D. Harlan Wilson’s contribution to the series, a critical companion to Alfred Bester’s *The Stars My Destination* (1956), skillfully answers these guiding questions through its focus upon Bester as a pivotal figure in the development of the New Wave and cyberpunk movements. As Wilson argues, Bester’s commitment to pushing science fiction beyond its pulp roots was fundamental to the development of the former subgenre while the particular novel in question acts as an early landmark of proto-cyberpunk fiction. In this way, Wilson’s critical companion emphasizes the radical impact of *The Stars My Destination*, which propelled the canon past the frequently childish inclinations of its earliest works and towards new terrain, including complex analyses of privilege, power, class, and hegemony.



Wilson’s critical companion centers upon the thesis that Bester’s novel “mapped new terrain in postwar SF” and that it “accomplishes what pre-1950s SF novels failed to do in terms of *style*, *structure*, and *attitude*” (17). It is divided into sections covering the author’s career and the novel’s historical context, intertextual relationships with earlier and later science fiction works, and the text’s coded commentary on class, gender, race, and religion. The first chapter focuses upon the inspiration and resulting legacy of *Stars*, provides a biography of Bester, illuminates his role as both a critical writer of SF and a harsh critic of its contributors, and underscores the recurring tropes of Bester’s fiction. After a synopsis of the novel in Wilson’s second chapter, chapter three explores the literary influences that shaped Bester’s writing style, which Wilson characterizes as dominated by literary tropes and allusions. It additionally considers how Bester’s fiction hints at the future of the genre. Focusing narrowly upon the intertextual parallels existing between the novel and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), chapter four considers these novels’ mutual interest

in “charismatic monsters and meta-referentially point to the inherent mad scientism of Shelley’s and Bester’s authorship as well as narrative itself” (17). The most pivotal of Wilson’s contributions in this chapter is his analysis of *Stars* as a palimpsest under which lie multiple undertexts whose relationships to Bester’s novel are worthy of consideration, including, in addition to Shelley’s novel, the archetypal monomyth and H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) (70).

Moving past these intertextual considerations, Wilson focuses his fifth and sixth chapters upon the commentary Bester includes in the subtext of his novel upon identity markers and religious belief. “Architectures of Psyche, Power, and Patriarchy” considers Bester’s social views and his encoding of them in *Stars*. Analyzing specifically the novel’s treatments of gender, race, and class, Wilson complicates readings of the text as simply conservative or, on the other hand, radically progressive. Through a careful analysis of the future Bester imagines and the ways the novel’s protagonist, Gully Foyle, embodies both this society’s values and capability of evolving, Wilson introduces welcomed nuance to his analysis of the novel’s subtext. As Wilson outlines, his key argument in this chapter is that Bester “was more evolved than his contemporaries and made strides toward greater equality despite his own construction and entitlement as a white male author” (75). In this way, he presents a balanced critique of Bester as a patriarchal reflection of the culture within which he wrote and as a writer who at times radically subverted widely accepted, conservative perspectives on race, class, and gender.

In the final chapter of Wilson’s text, he considers the pervasive nature of religion within the encoded message of Bester’s novel. In one particularly insightful segment of this analysis, Wilson outlines the textual and extratextual implications of Bester’s encoded critiques of religion as they relate to language. As the title of the chapter, “Speaking in Gutter Tongues,” signals, Wilson illuminates an important connection binding language and religion in *Stars*. More specifically, he illuminates how dialect and other linguistic elements signal religious affiliation in this imagined society. The protagonist’s “lower-class gutter tongue,” for example, underscores his lack of anti-religious identity (101). But, as Wilson keenly observes, this connection between religion and language works simultaneously as a reflection of Bester’s extratextual desires and intentions as a science fiction writer. Specifically, Bester, Wilson contends, takes on the religious mantle of an exorcist, a mantle similarly taken on by Foyle in the novel. Both Bester and his protagonist aspire to positively reshape “their respective worlds—one from the violence of upper-class tyranny and prejudice, the other from the limitations of SF writers who fail to live up to the genre’s great potential” (101). According to Wilson, language and religion remain, therefore, entwined both within and immediately outside of the novel. This underscoring of Bester’s commentary connecting language and religion within the novel’s plot and Bester’s perceived role as a linguistic exorcist of sorts makes up a pivotal strength of Wilson’s critical companion.

Alfred Bester’s The Stars My Destination: A Critical Companion is overall a valuable critical tool for a wide audience. It is well-suited both for students seeking a broad guide to Bester’s novel and scholars in search of an in-depth introductory analysis of its key themes, tropes, and encoded messages. Moving beyond a simple overview of *Stars*, Wilson utilizes theoretically sound

and sophisticated critical approaches to interrogate the novel's significance and impact upon the science fiction genre. With its emphasis upon the ways *Stars* challenged science fiction's trajectory and conservative political messaging, Wilson's critical companion is a strong addition to Palgrave's *New Canon* series.

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FICTION REVIEWS



Review of *The City We Became*

Heather Thaxter



Jemisin, N.K. *The City We Became*. Orbit, 2020.

“Cities really are different. They make a weight on the world, a tear in the fabric of reality, like... like black holes, maybe”. The opening words of N. K. Jemisin’s 2020 novel *The City We Became* provocatively hint at the liminality of the spaces occupied by people and cityscapes. The very essence of a city is created by the nuances of its residents and the ways in which they interact with each other and the material objects that make up the topography of that specific space. Jemisin often addresses this interdependent tension in her works by implementing a kind of literary stratigraphy, uncovering layers of complex systems and external factors that determine the identity of any given city. In *The City We Became*, Jemisin develops her original short story, “The City Born Great,” which was published in her 2018 collection *How Long ‘Til Black Future Month?*



The protagonist in the short story, an unnamed, black, homeless youth is chosen by the city as a midwife to assist in New York’s birth. *The City We Became* picks up the narrative after a difficult and not entirely successful birth, leaving the character in a coma-like condition hidden beneath the surface, both literally and in terms of plot. While this character remains fragmentary and elusive, five avatars, each representing a different borough of New York, take center stage in the quest to deal with postpartum complications. These avatars each capture the diverse collective characteristics of the sum parts that make up the whole city, and, although they are drawn together to defeat the mysterious and menacing enemy who appears in the guise of an almost translucent “woman in white,” their individual differences cause friction as they are territorial and defensive.

These differences are identified in the way they communicate: Bronca (Bronx), speaks through art; Brooklyn (Brooklyn), via political language and the rhythm of hip hop; Padmini (Queens), utilizes mathematical equations; Manny (Manhattan), employs violence, particularly in his previous iteration, and the language of economics; and Aislyn (Staten Island), lacking a voice, has no means of communicating effectively and is easily manipulated by the enemy.

Jemisin draws on the familiar tropes of speculative fiction and Afrofuturism—supernatural beings, myths, and spatio-temporal liminal gaps, in this case portals to multiverses—to reveal the fragile nature of this emerging city and the potential for other histories, existences, and futures. Interestingly, the avatars have hallucinatory visions of another reality of New York, although

they don't physically enter it. Jemisin plays with the theory of multiverses attempting to overlay each other in a palimpsestic manner. Bronca, the First Nation character, is used as storyteller to explain the idea of many worlds, which resonates with Neil de Grasse Tyson's explanation of the hypothesis (Science Time); she then goes on to outline how worlds are constantly created through imagination (Jemisin 302).

The topography of the boroughs, islands separated by water and bridges, mirrors the flickering, "peculiar dual-boot of reality," whereby people and places are connected and disconnected by perspectives (32). It is this apparent glitch between worlds or realities that is presented as being dangerous to the city's "becoming" and the population who make up the city's identity. Tendrils of white ominous nubs rise from cracks in the asphalt and seep into the "normal" New York, threatening to contaminate and obliterate that version of reality.

Explicit references to H.P. Lovecraft's bigoted view of non-white people are made through an alternative reality, a city whose identity is produced by a specific, limited worldview represented by the sinister "woman in white" (the embodiment of Lovecraft's demonic R'lyeh). The only avatar to align herself to this perspective is Aislyn (Staten Island) as she is already stunted by fear and self-imposed isolation. It is not surprising that Aislyn is the only white avatar as she represents the insidious effects of racism that run counter to and are threatened by the diversity of the population.

The woman in white determines that the "acculturation quotient is dangerously high," and this is the sticking point for those like Aislyn whose phobias close off their minds to embracing difference (96). A city is born when "enough human beings occupy one space, tell enough stories about it, develop a unique culture, and all those layers of reality start to compact and metamorphose" (304). Jemisin draws on the history of Staten Island to highlight its arbitrary and tenuous connection to the city, hence its resistance to support the other boroughs and protect the vulnerable, primary avatar. The enemy, which is a city itself from an alternative reality, eventually becomes caught between realms. This sense of in-betweenness is the crux of the narrative, what could or would be if other dynamics were more dominant. In a final attempt to anchor itself into existence, the enemy clings to Staten Island, thus opening the way for the second book in this series, *The World We Make*.

Jemisin expertly captures the essence of what makes New York the city it is and creates complex, imperfect characters that embody that spirit. Her insight into the relationship between humans and the cityscapes they occupy is unique, thereby positioning her as an award-winning, leading author in this genre. Not only has she been nominated for and won numerous awards, including Locus, Nebula, and Tiptree, Jemisin is the only recipient of three consecutive Best Novel Hugo Awards and the recipient of the MacArthur Fellows Program (2020). Jemisin deftly incorporates her observations and experience of living in New York to reveal possibilities and challenge realities. *The City We Became* addresses many of the issues that are faced by modern-day populations in a way that is familiar, understandable, and raw, but, importantly, hopeful. The

energy that overcomes the enemy emanates from the city itself, its sights and sounds mimicking a heartbeat. Once again, Jemisin adeptly peels back the layers to reveal the soul of the city in a way only she can.

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Review of *A Half-Built Garden*

Jeremy Brett



Ruthanna Emrys. *A Half-Built Garden*. Tordotcom, 2022. Paperback. 340 pg. \$18.99. ISBN 978-1-250-21099-9.

After enough time, one might be forgiven in thinking that there can be no new First Contact stories to tell. It's a truly singular event when an author takes a classic sf trope and spins it in a new direction infused with existential social and political relevance. This sort of literary shift was already accomplished by author Ruthanna Emrys in her "Innsmouth Legacy" series, in which she infused the classic Lovecraftian universe of cosmic horror with empathy and feeling for the marginalized in opposition to the racism endemic to Lovecraft and his era. With *A Half-Built Garden*, Emrys brings modern and lasting concerns for the future of humanity and Earth (which the novel takes pains to point out are not, to certain people, the same thing at all) to a wholly unusual and thoughtful story of alien encounter.



In 2083, the Earth has been engaged for several decades in a radical moment of social, political, and corporate restructuring. Nation-states have been replaced or supplemented by networks centered on the maintenance, restoration, and care of environmentally critical watersheds. The rampant capitalists that ravaged the planet in the 20th and 21st centuries have for the most part been reduced to small island enclaves, connected to the watershed networks and traditional governing structures in uneasy alliances of trade and supply. The networks, which sprung into existence as part of the Dandelion movement (the image, of course, suggesting seeds being spread by the free flow of the wind) govern themselves through collaboration, consensus, and intimate communication rooted in problem-solving. The Dandelion networks devote themselves to repairing what had been so desperately, horribly broken in the world by capitalism and nationalism. Adaptation and harmony are increasingly default human values, and for the first time, despite ongoing struggle, there is hope.

And then the aliens landed. So goes the cliché, but one thing that makes Emrys' novel so particularly remarkable is the response from this altered world. The novel avoids chronicling an all-out defensive reaction from the militaries of the world, frenzied government scrambling, mass panic (in fact, among the most striking aspects of the book is the immediate acceptance by humans of the aliens as they walk among us), or the complete absence of panic or fear. Those responses are replaced instead with curiosity, acceptance, honest attempts at connection

and friendship, attempts at exploitation (by the capitalists), and even sexual exploration (by protagonist/narrator Judy and her wife Carol with the alien representative Rhamnetin). Alien encounters, Emrys posits, bring out the full range of human behavior in people; we are not limited to our most atavistic responses. This attitude of optimism denotes the novel's true throughline. We see it from the very opening, in which Judy notes "In the bad old days (the commentary said later), nation-states had plans laid in for this sort of thing. They'd have caught the ship on satellite surveillance. They'd have gotten in the ground with sterile tents and tricorders and machine learning translators, taking charge. In a crisis, we still look for the big ape." However, "instead of a big ape shouting orders, the world got me." (1) Humble Judy, of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Network, becomes the Earth's first ambassador to alien life after stumbling across a crashed spaceship – and, as she points out "That would have been a good time for cynicism – for someone to ask if we believed them, or if their definition of peace looked anything like ours. But no one wanted to spoil the moment of joy. We didn't want to play nation-style realpolitik, or be properly mature and suspicious. We wanted to talk. However complicated things got afterward, I still can't regret that." (6) In *Half-Built Garden*, hope in peaceful connection is a precious resource and a defense against a hostile universe.

And that hope is crucial, because the aliens have brought a choice that seems to be no choice. The aliens are comprised of multiple species (represented on this mission by the spider-like "tree folk" and the more insectile "plains folk") from the Rings, a system of artificial worlds that exists because the Ringers have determined that all intelligent life inevitably destroys its own homeworld and must go into space to survive. Having discovered humanity before it's too late, they bring an offer—really, more of a predetermined conclusion—to evacuate the planet and move humans out to the stars. The corporates jump at the chance, ready to leave Earth and reestablish their shattered traditions of dominance and power among new, alien markets. Nation-states (represented here mainly by NASA as the avatar of a reduced American government) are driven by curiosity and excitement to see what's out there. However, the Dandelion networks have invested decades of rescue in trying to stabilize and repair the environment, and Judy, Carol, and the people who comprise those networks are not prepared to surrender their home for which they have fought so hard. The novel turns on this existential-level decision, and on the multiple conversations between and among humans and Ringers on humanity's future. Emrys places the need for radical and trusting connection at the story's center, the crucial importance of reaching for understanding across vastly divergent mindsets and motives.

A debate between the Ringers and Dandelion representatives towards the end of the novel summarizes these differing views of the universe that each party holds. Judy, the descendant of a traumatized humanity that teetered on the verge of self-destruction (as well as being Jewish and therefore a custodian of a tragic tradition of forcible wandering), points out that "It's good to live in a time when we *have* a time we can love. Someplace we can afford to grow attached to." One of the Ringers, Glycine, responds "But many of us believe you have to drag people out of a burning building, whether they love the building or not. The question is whether Earth is burning." Judy's

friend and colleague Atheo fires back, “It’s burning... Well, it’s true. But we’re getting the fire under control. It’s a matter of whether you trust us to know the resilience of our own home, whether you treat us as adults who can calculate our own risk rather than kids who don’t know any better” (256). Emrys follows the traditional pattern of a story of alien contact in casting it as a moment for exploring the nature of humanity in the face of an overwhelming and world-changing event; her twist is presenting it as a time of *choosing*, not merely whether humanity will survive at all, but *how* and *where*. She asks the questions: is our home planet, the only home we have ever known as a species, integral to our identity? Will we be the same, and if not, how will we change, if we actually leave Earth and become part of a wider universe? Most critically, if motives are so different, can a true symbiosis between species and the creation of new families and alliances be achieved?

The novel proposes that an informed exchange and sharing of ethical values, together with recognition of differences among ourselves, is the key to effective symbiosis and the bridging of ideological divides. Judy at one point speaks of “the value and the means to achieve it. I’m trying to tell you [the Ringers] that we share the value. Our ancestors either didn’t share it, or didn’t act on it, but we do. And we do *because* we’ve developed technology for not only identifying our values, but for consistently acting on them” (318). And the trans character Dori offers her coming out as a gift to the Ringers, noting that her parents loved who and what she was more than what they expected her to be. She tells the Ringers that “we can use your gifts in ways you don’t expect, too—if you can cope with us using different means to achieve our shared values. Your technologies for making habitats livable could help save Earth...Symbiosis with Ringers could give us both new tools, new ways to survive in a cold universe” (319). The Dandelions ask an alien society averse to risk and afraid of catastrophe to take a chance on humanity’s potential and its promise, to let systems go unconstrained. In that request lies the continuation of the hope and determination that brought humanity out of its age of power into the late 21st century age of nature. The “half-built garden” of the title in the end, we find, is not only an Earth slowly and gradually being wrested from destruction, but a species just beginning to understand its possible role in a new and symbiotic galaxy.

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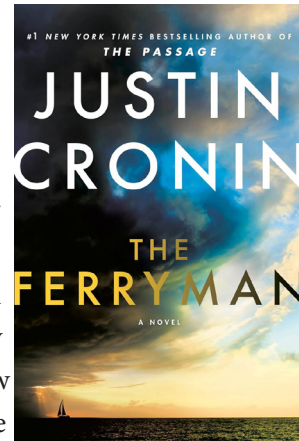
Review of *The Ferryman*

Adam McLain



Cronin, Justin. *The Ferryman*. Ballantine Books, 2023.

Separated into three islands—the main island, the Annex, and the Nursery—Prospera is a utopia cut off from the rest of the world. Created by the Designer to shelter the best of humanity, the inhabitants of the main island live paradisaically, pursuing whatever passion or desire drives them. This paradise does not mean that they do not work or live as mere mortals—they still age, if slowly; still work, just not menial labor jobs; and still die. But their death and birth are unique: they arrive by ferry from the Nursery in a body in its late teens, capable of basic human functions but also able to avidly learn new things, and they leave by ferry to the Nursery when their health number on their monitors reaches a low count, meaning they no longer enjoy life. This cyclical nature of existence is guided by Ferrymen like Proctor Bennett who lead those at the end of the cycle back to the ferry.



Proctor's life in Prospera is idyllic. He has a good fifteen-year contract with his current partner, Elise. Although their relationship is cooling after many years together, they still are happy and content. His job is fulfilling, challenging, and a point of personal pride. He wouldn't do anything to change his life. This changes, however, when he takes his father to the ferry and his father has a catatonic breakdown, telling his son, "The world is not the world. You're not you... Oranios. It's all Oranios" (62). His father leaves by ferry, but Proctor's world is forever changed. As he searches for the answers to his father's mumblings, he faces off against bureaucratic corruption bent on stopping him, class warfare building between the Annex and the main island, and the possibilities of what his life for the last hundreds of years really means.

Utopia, space exploration, climate fiction—Cronin writes the genre tropes well. I connected to each character as their backstory was revealed, and I lingered over sentences meticulously crafted to enhance the experience. The sentences are lyrical and whimsical; at times I thought I was moving through an ethereal dream only to be reminded that pain and strife still exist. Cronin's use of the English language is his crowning point in this novel. But where I get stuck is there is no innovation with the tropes: each reveal is satisfying, but it is also predictable, if one knows science fiction well enough. This critique does not necessarily diminish the book. I wouldn't go so far as to say that Cronin's goal in the project is to subvert or expand tropes or send the genre along a new

path. It is a text that is beautifully written, like Samuel R. Delany's work, but also one that is not so concerned with generic questions, unlike Delany's work.

Cronin's exploration of utopia, turning point theory, simulation theory, climate catastrophe, and space travel are not meant to explore new depths in the subject; instead, he centers, and this is the beautiful part of the book, these grand ideas not around the ideas themselves but around the characters that enact them. His book becomes a meditation on relationships (parent to child, person to person, manager to employee) that left me re-thinking my own relationships and approaches to them. The central struggle of the book is with the loss of loved ones and not just a fight with authority, a quest for truth, and the revelation of survival.

However, after reading the book twice, I'm not entirely sure what the central message of the project is when it comes to the larger, systemic issues it presents. Along with its meditation on relationships, the book presents messages about class struggle, environmental destruction, and existence through mediations on simulation theory. These systemic questions become lost in the deployment of the tropes because Cronin does not emphasize one over the other; instead, he lets the tropes play out as they normally might in a blockbuster science fiction story. The critique of class, for example, is limited in its execution because it presents the same rich-vs.-poor dynamic that many utopias and dystopias exacerbate. The struggle leads to action—the oppressed in the Annex begin marching on the privileged on the main island—but Cronin doesn't provide readers with enough paratextual information to give this struggle any heart or depth. A scene between the main character and his housekeeper illustrates this reading: Proctor converses with his housekeeper from the Annex about her son. He realizes that he barely knows anything about the son, even though he promised to take the son sailing. The scene shows the class separation and inhumanity between the wealthy of the main island and the working class of the Annex, but it barely goes beyond that presentation. His housekeeper is used later to smuggle Proctor information to sneak out of the Nursery, but beyond that, the book leaves this class relationship alone, thus leaving the message of class itself aborted in many ways. The final message on class, with the climactic reveal at the end, seems to be that class struggle brings about social change, since the Annex's revolution against the main island ends in a social upheaval, but I am still unsure what the little moments about these broader, systemic arguments mean.

Even as I struggle with how Cronin does not do a lot with the tropes he's working with, I also think that this deployment of tropes could be seen as a good part of the text: it is marketed toward a wider audience than academics discussing genre, and as such, the use of the tropes makes it easier to use *The Ferryman* as a starting point into the genre of the science fiction epic. When I went to the local Barnes and Noble to ask about Cronin, the bookseller took me to the horror genre bookshelves, because "that's where Cronin is usually shelved" even though there is nothing remotely close to the horror genre in *The Ferryman*. The bookseller was thinking about Cronin's earlier work, especially the 2010–2016 Passage trilogy, which is a post-apocalyptic, zombie-vampire series. But in shelving *The Ferryman* in this genre, I believe its use of utopia and climate fiction as a genre is a way to introduce this side of genre fiction to readers. Thus, I recommend

The Ferryman as a strong entryway but not as a complication of science fiction. It can begin conversation rather than continue it, a good place to start an undergraduate or graduate course talking about utopia, futurism in science fiction, or climate fiction and space expansion.

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Review of *Some Desperate Glory*

Sarah Nolan-Brueck



Tesh, Emily. *Some Desperate Glory*, Tor Publishing Group, 2023.

Emily Tesh's *Some Desperate Glory* takes a classic science fiction premise and scrambles it. What if there was an all-knowing artificial intelligence that could help us decide which actions would serve the most people? What if we had a calculus for the greatest possible happiness? Valkyr—or Kyr—a young woman and warrior for humanity, lives in the shadow of just such an intelligence, an ultra-powerful, reality-bending force called the Wisdom. The major problem? Humanity did not invent this superpower, and the civilization that did, the *majo*, follows the Wisdom's advice to destroy the Earth. Kyr is a warbreed, a genetically modified weapon for humanity's revenge, born on Gaea Station decades after the death of her planet. She is a special favorite to her mentor and the station's de facto leader, "uncle" Aulus Jole, and a clear frontrunner for a glamorous assignment in one of the combat wings. When assignments arrive, however, Kyr finds herself placed in Nursery, the child-bearing and rearing sector, a wing with all the fatality of combat but none of the glory. Reeling from this shock and the defection of her twin brother, Mags, Kyr takes the ultimate risk and leaves Station Gaea to prove herself and to find out the truth about her place in the universe.



Some Desperate Glory is Tesh's best-selling first novel, following *Silver in the Wood* (2019) and *Drowned Country* (2020), the two novellas of the Greenhollow Duology that marked her dark fantasy debut. In a departure, then, from her previous works, *Some Desperate Glory* employs many of the familiar elements of high concept science fiction: a young hero with a singular goal, an alien enemy, and a slew of new combat-driven technology. Yet, the initial set-up belies the narrative's complexity. *Some Desperate Glory* expands into a tale of manipulation, where coming of age includes shattering a worldview on multiple fronts and in multiple universes. Like many young heroines, Kyr learns that her world and her place in it could have been otherwise; furthermore, she is allowed to live the alternatives, in a fragmented and sweeping narrative that allows the reader to enjoy multiple facets of Tesh's deep world-building.

Reminiscent of Melissa Scott's *Shadow Man* (1995), *Some Desperate Glory* takes two wildly conflicting worldviews and smashes them up against one another, with interesting implications for gendered representation. While gender roles on Gaea are so strict as to control literal lifetime

assignments, the majo have an entirely different understanding of physiology and procreation. What makes *Some Desperate Glory* a uniquely queer tale is the gendered deconstruction that comes from both the humans central to the novel and from an outsider's perspective. The majo have a difficult time understanding Gaeian concepts of gender and must puzzle over what they've learned about human physical markers to tell them apart. Majo themselves use agender pronouns to make themselves legible to humans, but they don't seem to use these words to describe themselves in other contexts. On Gaea, there is no recognized form of life partnership, and sex is, ostensibly, reserved for reproduction, focused on meeting the station's population targets. Queerness, then, is something Kyr can't seem to properly process. Two of the girls in her mess are known to kiss and couple off, but Kyr doesn't understand what is so important about "a sex thing;" to her, romantic attachment means distraction. As long as it doesn't get in the way of Gaea's operations, it's harmless and unimportant. These multiple views—represented in Kyr, her companions, and a majo interloper—constantly collide to refresh Kyr's worldview, providing constant revelations that alter her perspective.

While *Some Desperate Glory* is concerned with gender inequality and reproductive decision-making, it is unlike more common reproductive dystopias. Kyr's concern is not primarily for her own fate or the fate of any potential children she might have; rather, as Kyr discovers the depth of the deception surrounding her, her greatest goal is to shut the system down altogether. *Some Desperate Glory* has all the brutality of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985) or Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) and a similar pre-occupation with how birth and controlling leadership can circumscribe a life. The novel, however, reserves a special place for tenderness and community where little would seem to exist. Finding the capacity to turn a novel about militarization into a tale of friendship, collaboration, and daring, Tesh crafts a unique story, which is as mind-bending and fast-paced as it is enjoyable and kind.

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Review of *Africa Risen: A New Era of Speculative Fiction*

Reo Lewis



Thomas, Sheree Renée, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki, and Zelda Knight,
eds. *Africa Risen: A New Era of Speculative Fiction*. Tordotcom, 2022.

Twenty-four years ago, the goal of the prolific African-American writer and editor Sheree Renée Thomas in her highly-regarded anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), was to “correct the misperception that black writers are recent to the field” (6). There is perhaps no better testament to the achievement of her goal than the ever-growing list of science-fiction and fantasy anthologies centring authors from Africa and its diaspora since *Dark Matter*’s publication: from Nalo Hopkinson’s *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2004) to Nisi Shawl’s *New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color* (2019) and *Dominion: An Anthology of Speculative Fiction from Africa and the African Diaspora* (2020), edited by Thomas’ collaborators Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki, and Zelda Knight. The editors of *Africa Risen* no longer have to convince their readers that black writers are prolific in this genre because, to anyone with more than a passing familiarity with science-fiction and fantasy, the point has already been made. With the burden of proof removed from their shoulders, the stories in *Africa Risen* are free to “continue the mission of imagining, combining genres and infusing them with tradition, futurism, and a healthy serving of hope” (4). Undoubtedly, it is in the moments when this anthology takes advantage of this unimpeded creative and cultural freedom that the stories shine best.



From the contents page alone, *Africa Risen* begins to impress readers with the names of included speculative literary giants such as Tananarive Due and Steven Barnes. Barnes’ story “IRL” is the first real stand-out of the collection, a cyberpunk-esque exploration of black masculinity and fatherhood with characters motivated by the drive to provide for one’s family and community against the obstacles of corruption in the economic, justice, and healthcare system. It is a story that legitimises the use of escapism and worldbuilding as tools of survival. “IRL” quickly proves itself to be among good company with the other stories of *Africa Risen*. Wole Talabi’s “A Dream of Electric Mothers” turns bureaucratic indecision into an opportunity to commune with a digital ancestral hivemind, with a main character who finds resolution and strength through her maternal lineage. “The Sugar Mill” by Tobias S. Buckell is also about ancestral communion, except this time in the form of a ghost story with the intimate feel of a family drama rather than a campfire horror tale.

Haunting manifests through bloodlines of trauma—the ghosts haunt the land where their blood was spilt and they haunt their descendant who carries their blood and the haunting doesn't end until they are properly memorialised and safeguarded against neo-colonisers who would disregard their pain and their history. “The Lady of the Yellow-Painted Library” by Tobi Ogundiran (a story which has gained popularity after being featured on an episode of the podcast *Levar Burton Reads*) reads like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, exploring the inescapable and cyclical burden of responsibility using an African Literature classic, *Things Fall Apart*, as the plot's MacGuffin—the object that serves to set and keep the plot in motion despite usually lacking intrinsic importance, like The One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings*. “Hanfo Driver” by Ada Nnadi is a slice-of-life tale with casually diverse characters and a realistic view of how technological disparity will continue in the future, leading to a relatively low-stakes conflict and heartwarming humour.

With just a quick summary of these five standout stories, it is clear the impressive range of settings, themes, and characters that appear in *Africa Risen*. However, as to be expected with an anthology of thirty-two stories, not all of them work as well as the others. There are many stories in *Africa Risen* that lead the reader to think, “Didn't I just read a better version of this a second ago?” But these choices come across as intentional rather than redundant. These stories are in conversation with each other, with the writer, and with the SFF generic tradition. Just because “Cloud Mine” by Timi Odueso is the eco-dystopia from a child main character's point-of-view that resonated most with me due to its lens of systemic abuse and labour exploitation, it doesn't mean another reader wouldn't prefer Dilman Dila's “The Blue House,” Russell Nichols' “Mami Wataworks,” or Moustapha Mbacké Diop's “When the Mami Wata Met a Demon.” Likewise, while Alexis Brooks de Vita's “A Girl Crawls in a Dark Corner” is a standout for me, others might prefer the alternate history retelling of WC Dunlap's “March Magic” or the feminist horror of Mame Bougouma Diene and Woppa Diallo's “A Soul of Small Places.” “Liquid Twilight” by Ytasha Womack is a mermaid story with a cinematic feel and captivating characters who treat speculative work as a form of activism and vice versa, but another reader might prefer the representation of activism in Akua Lezli Hope's “The Papermakers.” Stories within an anthology are collaborative, not competitive. The fact that many of these authors chose to write about similar topics only reinforces the importance of these themes in literature in general. These stories are just as concerned with the role of history, tradition, and ancestry as they are with futurism. These worlds are fully realised: there are no dystopias without hope and activism towards change and there are no utopias without realism and a critique of the status quo. And for every story that felt like it was treading familiar ground, there was also a story which had something new to say, whether it was about misogyny and trauma exploitation in the music industry (“Peeling Time (Deluxe Edition)” by Tlotlo Tsamaase), PTSD and the exploitation of child soldiers (“A Knight in Tunisia” by Alex Jennings) or the African-American fantasy of Pan-African return (“Ruler of the Rear Guard” by Maurice Broadus). By the time you reach the end of the collection, you truly feel like you have experienced a cohesive yet diverse presentation of thirty-two Afro-speculative worlds.

As with any anthology, there isn't space to review every story, but there is one story that it would be remiss not to mention as, in my opinion, "Air to Shape Lungs" by Shingai Njeri Kaguda, is emblematic of what *Africa Risen* is all about. Although it is not the diaspora story the editors chose to end the collection with (Dare Segun Falowo's "Biscuit & Milk" gets that honour), to me it is the diaspora story of the anthology, the one that best narrates the feeling of home-seeking and anti-rootedness of the diaspora experience through a disembodied, airborne, communal "we" voice. It is narrated in two alternating sections, "Memory" and "Living Now," which summarise perfectly the concerns of the authors throughout the collection. Speculative fiction is most often associated with futurism, but in the hands of these African and Afro-diasporic authors, speculative fiction is equally about the legacies of the past and the concerns of the present as it is about the imagination of the future. *Africa Risen* may not be revolutionary in the way *Dark Matter* was, but it is not the job of black writers to revolutionise with every story they tell: black speculative fiction writers, like all speculative fiction writers, only need to be allowed space to have fun, to debate, to explore and to innovate. Undoubtedly, with *Africa Risen*, Sheree Renée Thomas, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki, and Zelda Knight have once again provided that space for African and Afro-diasporic authors to thrive.

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MEDIA REVIEWS



Image by jggrz

Nope

Victoria Carl



Nope. Directed by Jordan Peele. Monkeypaw Productions and Universal Pictures, 2022.

Nope is, at first glance, a classic alien invasion/abduction movie. Jordan Peele, in an interview with GQ, described his intent as being to create a “summer blockbuster spectacle film” that reflected his perspective on the genre (Kennedy). While *Nope*’s critical and commercial success qualify it as a blockbuster, its categorization as an “alien invasion,” “alien abduction,” or even just an *alien* movie is less straightforward. *Nope* draws on tropes from these SF subgenres, consciously engaging with prior alien works and themes, but resists categorization as such a movie, subverting expectations by revealing its alien icons as artifice and deception—costumes whose similarity to the SF conceptualization of the alien is exploited by the movie’s characters for the sake of spectacle. In doing this, Peele builds out of the legacy set by prior SF works and criticism but defines a new space for *Nope*. It’s a movie with the aesthetic of an alien invasion narrative, but with the plot of a creature feature flick.



Nope is Jordan Peele’s third film as director, released in the summer of 2022. There are three POV characters: Otis Jr (OJ) and Emerald (Em) Haywood, played by Daniel Kaluya and Keke Palmer respectively, who have inherited the family business, Haywood Hollywood Horses, after their father’s untimely death; and Ricky “Jupe” Park, a traumatized child star turned mini-theme park owner portrayed by Steven Yeun. There are two storylines: the primary plot follows OJ and Em in their attempts to capture compelling footage of a UFO—specifically one that OJ has witnessed—to sell for fame and fortune and stabilize Haywood Hollywood Horses. The secondary plot is much shorter and features Jupe—first, as a child aboard the set of sitcom *Gordy’s Home*, on the day that one of the chimps who played Gordy, snapped and attacked the rest of the cast; and second, in the present day, as he unveils a new, special show called the “Star Lasso Experience” at the mini-theme park he owns, Jupiter’s Claim.

In general, *Nope* is a movie that’s very conscious about alien tropes and its place in science fiction. Only, in *Nope*, these familiar icons are never what most audiences would be expecting; they’re always something else, wearing the familiar SF icon as a deception. The movie wants its audience to think they’re watching another alien invasion or alien abduction movie, something so known as to now be tameable, and then it twists that expectation back on the viewer. The

“little green men” in the movie are only Jupe’s sons, dressed in costumes. The flying saucer is not a spaceship, nor is it piloted by an “alien species...call[ed] the Viewers” as Jupe is convinced. Instead, it is a creature, an animal, as we can tell from the way the *Gordy’s Home* subplot parallels the current-day encounter between the Haywoods and Jean Jacket. Both the characters and the movie recontextualize that UFO icon as animal, like Gordy, rather than alien.

Themes of exploitation and spectacle are also central to *Nope*, and this self-consciousness of genre allows the movie to meditate on how these familiar SF icons have been exploited and reduced to mere spectacle over time. It would make for an interesting study of how SF tropes came to be, and how our views of these tropes have changed over time, especially paired with *War of the Worlds*—especially the original novel and its 1953 and 2005 film adaptations—and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. These movie pairings provide a way into contemporary perspectives of the alien, the monstrous, and colonialism/postcolonialism. *Nope* provides a clear example of contemporary Western culture reckoning with these tropes and their histories, attempting to contextualize and revision them into something new and useful for the post-Internet, post-COVID world.

Animal studies scholars and monster theorists would also find interesting fruit here. Joan Gordon wrote about the potential for greater collaboration between animal studies and SF studies in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, and *Nope* is well-situated to consider the relationship between monster, “creature,” and “animal” in SF more broadly. Jean Jacket is a fictional creature, dressed to look like an alien spaceship, explicitly contextualized as behaving like an animal. Jupe and Holst both refuse to see Jean Jacket *as an animal* instead of *as an alien* or, even better, *as a spectacle*, and that fact gets them both killed. On the other hand, Em and OJ survive and succeed because they recognize Jean Jacket’s behaviors as animalistic and adjust accordingly; this dichotomy could be seen as the movie endorsing Em and OJ’s behavior and condemning Jupe and Holst’s. Of course, they *are* still using Jean Jacket, exploiting its novelty and resemblance to SF conceptions of UFOs and aliens for their own benefit, i.e., for spectacle. The movie ends before it can explore the consequences, if any, of this last exploitation. *Nope*’s interrogation and representation of the “alien” creature is complex and ambitious and presents interesting avenues for further research to those interested in the intersection between the Alien, the Animal, and the Other in SF.

The critical takeaways from *Nope* aren’t as clear cut as those from *War of the Worlds* or *Get Out*, but the movie is nonetheless rich with meaning to mine for. It’s not “just another alien invasion movie,” and its reflective take on both the alien and the Alien will appeal to scholars across science fiction studies.

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