

# The Cascadia Subduction Zone

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Lost in the Matrix ☉ Pam Sanders

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In This Issue





## We Have Never Been Postmodern:

### “Walking Stick Fires” and the Knowability of Science Fiction

by Alan DeNiro

In a recent issue of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, critic Paul Kincaid wrote an essay-review of three year’s best anthologies of fantasy and science fiction. He used the stories therein as proof points to reflect on what he considered the “state of the genre” (Kincaid, 2012). And using those stories as evidence, he doesn’t like what he sees, at least in the field of short fiction. From that essay—which garnered much thoughtful discussion—followed a podcast interview with Jonathan Strahan and Gary Wolfe, as well as a second interview with Nerds of a Feather (Strahan, 2012; Nerds, 2012). No matter how far the argument ranges, Kincaid’s central thesis revolves around the genre’s *exhaustion*:

In the main, there is no sense that the writers have any real conviction about what they are doing. Rather, the genre has become a set of tropes to be repeated and repeated until all meaning has been drained from them.



The problem may be, I think, that science fiction has lost confidence in the future. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it has lost confidence that the future can be comprehended. At its historical best, science fiction presented alien worlds and distant futures that, however weird they might seem, were always fundamentally understandable.



Judging by these three books, the genre is now afraid to engage with what once made it novel, instead turning back to what was there before. We might tinker with the details, but it seems that no-one has much interest in making it (a)new.

Several years ago, a group of my peers and myself had an ongoing discussion of “genre malaise.” That discussion framed a deliberate set of constraints and parameters that I used in the writing of the short story “Walking Stick Fires.” which is a story in one of the aforementioned Year’s Best anthologies and which Kincaid mentioned. Considering this thread of connection to issues of genre expectations and writerly adventurism, I want to discuss the writing process of “Walking Stick Fires” and connect that process to the specific examples of “exhaustion” used by Kincaid.

For sure, it can be perilous writing about one’s own work. I don’t think that any writer’s intentions are sacrosanct once a work reaches a reader, but I also don’t think awareness of the author’s intent is valueless, particularly as it relates to her or his creative process both as a writer *and as a reader*.

This puzzle has everything to do with the transition from a writer’s *creative process* to the *finished product* seen on the page (or screen). Perhaps this is obvious, but when discussing a literary *affect* (that is to say, exhaustion), it’s crucial to be as precise as possible in discerning where, in fact, in the relationship between reader and writer, this is coming from. A fine line distinguishes critiquing the literary value of a work from ascribing personality traits to writers based on what one reads of their finished work. I know of few writers—even of work that I wouldn’t care for—who wake up in the morning and say “You know what? I’m going to write a really mediocre story today! I, too, look forward to contributing to the state of exhaustion in the field!” That just doesn’t happen. I hesitate to bring this point up, but I think it does point to a larger problem with Kincaid’s argument: the essay tends to shut down the potential for a multiplicity of readerly perspectives, or even a single alternative

“...Kincaid’s central thesis revolves around the genre’s exhaustion.”

“When discussing a literary affect (that is to say, exhaustion), it’s crucial to be as precise as possible in discerning where, in fact, in the relationship between reader and writer, this is coming from. A fine line distinguishes critiquing the literary value of a work from ascribing personality traits to writers based on what one reads of their finished work.”



## Never Postmodern (cont. from p. 1)

*"If one takes seriously (as I do) that science fiction is just one continent in the vast ecology of fantasy, then the storytelling techniques of thousands of years of fantastic literature present an array of options that go beyond this little island of genre."*

to a rather monolithic way of looking at how genre mechanisms work.

Such a tendency exhibits itself in a kind of closed-door effect for actually engaging in what a story is trying to do. Kincaid says at one point in the first interview with Strahan:

True fantasy is as rigorous as science fiction: you play fair with the readers. If anything can happen, then nothing matters. Using the tropes of fantasy to resolve a science fiction story is just a way of waving your hand and saying "it doesn't matter, because anything can happen, all it takes is the whim of the author." I cannot read a story that takes that form without my confidence in both the writer and their creation instantly plummeting.

In theory this criticism is not such a bad thing. It's important for a writer, in the midst of writing and revising a story, to understand how the building blocks of prose and world building intersect with one another with an eye toward concision. However, in practice, I wonder about this insistence on "confidence" and whether it (or the lack of it) fosters a "guilty until proven innocent" approach about writing. Again, this has nothing to do with the taste of a particular reader and critic, but it does problematize creating a diagnosis for an entire field, much less a prescription, based on one's hunches about how a writer should "play fair."

I would contend that "playing fair" is only tangentially related to rigor in science fiction. If one takes seriously (as I do) that science fiction is just one continent in the vast ecology of fantasy, then the storytelling techniques of thousands of years of fantastic literature present an array of options that go beyond this little island of genre.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to talk about the genesis of "Walking Stick Fires." This requires going back a few years, when the "infernokrusher" movement was born. Infernokrusher is a half-joke, half-all-too-real genre liter-

ary movement created by an online powwow of friends and colleagues including David Moles, Meghan McCarron, Benjamin Rosenbaum, David Schwartz, Dora Goss, and several others (Moles, 2005). It was born out of a desire to "re-brand" slipstream (a term that mercifully hasn't been in use in this current debate) into something with a little more sleekness, volatility, and horsepower; in other words, to go beyond sidestepping issues of "exhaustion" in the genre and simply immolate them. It quickly evolved into an aesthetic that prized explosives, both literally and figuratively within a story. In one of its core tenets (listed as a "catchphrase"): "Infernokrusher fiction explodes stagnant genre conventions, e.g., that it's not okay to have all your characters run over by a monster truck in what would seem to be the middle of the story." Thus, it's a way to push against the boundaries of comfortability in what is "okay" in fiction, particularly the sf/f field.

Although there hasn't been much written Infernokrusher output, I wrote "Walking Stick Fires" with the Infernokrusher tenets in mind: breakneck speed in pacing, rapid changes in plot, and explosions. Moreover, when I found myself stuck in a particular point in the story, I tried to insert a car chase, a shoot-out, or a "wrong turn" in the thread of the story. This became an exercise in semiautomatic writing. Later, in revisions, I fleshed out some of the loose ends (for example, the world-consuming Beings and their ecosystem).

Whether this story succeeds or not, of course, is up to the discernment of readers, based on what they are seeking in their literature, and I have no control over that. The point is, though, that these Dadaist (or Vorticist) compositional techniques opened up an avenue into storytelling that, otherwise, I perhaps wouldn't have gone down. Trying to pinpoint this story on the spectrum of "is this story playing fair with the reader?" is beside the point. Every writer must find their own version of rigor, a grammar both of the world and of the heart. Infernokrusher for me was an organizing

*"Every writer must find their own version of rigor, a grammar both of the world and of the heart. Infernokrusher for me was an organizing principle, much like a poet's use of semi-formal verse...."*



principle, much like a poet's use of semi-formal verse—if not a strict sonnet, then at least one with lots of slant rhymes and iambic substitutions.

As for the contention that, in stories such as mine, the future is incomprehensible: as the saying goes, I consider this a feature, not a bug.

At one point Kincaid discusses “the trope in which neither author nor reader is expected to fully comprehend the future being presented.” That is, at least for me, not a trope. A “trope” is a poetic device; for me the incomprehensibility of the future is an epistemological premise that I present to the reader.

Kincaid thinks that, in some science fiction, “things are so different that there is no connection with the experiences and perceptions of our present.” This might be the fundamental disconnect I see in Kincaid's argument. For if the future is unknowable, then the work of fiction has to dwell either in the past or the present. He doesn't allow the possibility of a “connection” with the present unless—to reiterate—there is a certain *typology* of genre at work: one invested in careful extrapolation and a certainty about one's findings. But it's this very uncertainty of typology that I found worth exploring in “Walking Stick Fires.” And the bored imperialist assumptions of its protagonists, who have little interest in the actual goings-on of the resident populace (mostly forced to live in tunnels underground), was the central point of unspooling for the narrative, as they lurched from one misadventure to another. The speculative aspects of the story include aliens, yes, but also Toby Keith, Camaros, and kickboxing. Every choice of story has trade-offs and sacrifices and yields different rewards. Most stories are just as much about what is not included in them as what is. If I was writing a more “careful” story, I would not have been able to include, well, Toby Keith, Camaros, and kickboxing. And those “deep fried” elements were what, for me, the story needed.

Ceding certainty in the future allows for the possibility of “negative capability.” What is meant by negative capability?

Keats used the phrase in a letter in 1817, as a rejection of totalizing systems:

I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrallium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. (Li, 2009)

These “half-knowledges” are themselves durable, and the basis for a poetics that mediates between the lexicons of what we know and what we don't. (Again, it's not a complete *absence* of knowledge.) Negative capability can bring us to the heart of why one writes short stories in the first place. Fantasy and science fiction, in its various forms, are well-equipped to splice together its half-knowledges.

Different writers will approach them in different ways. But it's far more complicated than M. John Harrison's calling the problem one of “intense commodification of ideas & styles evacuated of their original meaning & impact” (Harrison, 2012). Harrison also references it as “pink slime fiction” (referencing the industrialized ground beef in fast food restaurants), as if short story writers working alone in their offices for very little pay, if any, somehow are mimicking a post-Fordist fast-food working model.

These interconnected parts gain their meaning in different ways based on what community a particular writer is at home within (or if she or he is in more than one community). I think Kincaid would agree that most writers on the literary side of the fence who write science fiction are not especially interested in carefully extrapolated futurology. This used to be a major red flag of amateurism, and sometimes it still is. But I also see more and more examples of writers who genuinely *love and appreciate* the possibilities of science fiction writing in a way that, I would figure, miss these marks for Kincaid, despite his call for more daring

*"[F]or me the incomprehensibility of the future is an epistemological premise that I present to the reader."*

*"Every choice of story has trade-offs and sacrifices and yields different rewards. Most stories are just as much about what is not included in them as what is."*





## Never Postmodern (cont. from p. 3)

*“Writers, particularly the newer generations of writers, are cobbling together their own system of poetics that draw on traditions of both the fantastic and the realistic.”*

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4 *“...this shift into a multiplicity of storytelling modes has nothing to do with “postmodernism.” Postmodernism is just the last gasp of modernism. The splicing together of genres is not a postmodern act, and it is not the inherent signal of death-of-genre, or exhaustion.”*

*“The postulation that we can understand the future through fiction is a comforting fiction, but to let go of it is not a capitulation into pure relativism.”*

and risk. They are simply pursuing other goals—whether they be a deep dive into characters (more about that later), an exploration of a disphoric tone, or an actualization of personal metaphysics. Writers, particularly the newer generations of writers, are cobbling together their own system of poetics that draw on traditions of both the fantastic and the realistic.

It appears that writers can only be “daring” if they share the same epistemological premises as Kincaid about what science fiction should be and do.

But that’s exactly it. Science fiction as a unified “project,” even one that leads from the edges, is more or less over. There are only science fiction stories, and fantasy stories, and science fantasy stories, and, well, you get the point. That is where the change has come—a move away from seeing the comprehensibility of the future as a worthwhile project. Of course, some writers are still going to continue in that mode, and that is great. But it’s not going to be *assumed as a given*. And this has nothing inherently to do with the Singularity. The amount of thought I give to the Singularity is pretty much zero. To announce that as the wellspring of the “problem” is to make a blanket assumption about what writers are, in fact, really interested in writing about. And as a writer, I *want* that project to be over, because I think that it has become less and less useful with each passing decade. Moreover, this project is its own mishmash from the very origins of the genre (endearing at times, astoundingly frustrating at others)—from the twin imperatives of Gernsbackian scientific pedagogy and lurid neo-colonial exoticism under the guise of “adventure.” Why should writers continue not to examine these very premises?

Speaking of false flags, this shift into a multiplicity of storytelling modes has nothing to do with “postmodernism.” Postmodernism is just the last gasp of modernism. The splicing together of genres is not a postmodern act, and it is not the inherent signal of death-of-genre, or exhaustion. Its results—like many other human endeavors!—vary.

Far from the unknowability of the future being an epistemological closure (and the past and the present, for that matter, as their own quandaries), this is more of a grappling with reality itself. This is the “truth content”—that, no, by definition, the future *cannot* be understood. Thus describing this as lazy postmodernism does not delve close at all to this truth. The postulation that we can understand the future through fiction is a comforting fiction, but to let go of it is not a capitulation into pure relativism.

At one point, Kincaid asks a rhetorical question about this type of fiction: “If anything can happen, then what is the consequence of any action?”

This is precisely the question worth careful exploration through storytelling. (Or even wild exploration.) And science fiction and fantasy have unique toolsets to make these types of stories matter: through world-building (even if the rivets are not perfect), through characterization of “the Other,” through a willingness to take a speculative turn with prose.

What does this leave us with, then? If this project is not under consideration for me and, I would venture, an increasing number of other writers, what is left?

“Science fiction” is going to include anti-sf. It’s also going to include post-sf, mushy sf, forward-looking sf, and backward-looking sf. It’s going to include YA-influenced sf and manga-influenced sf. It’s also going to include the sf built from solid extrapolative models. And it’s going to include fantasy. The issue of the quality of stories in the field is a separate matter not inherently tied to this loosening of the strictures of what science fiction “ought to be.” In this sense, there is fertile ground for the type of risk-taking that both Kincaid and I would encourage. And as a writer, I’m more than happy to be part of this ongoing conversation.

\* The title of the essay is a riff on the title *We Have Never Been Modern*, by Bruno Latour.



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Alan DeNiro is the author of the story collection *Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead* (Small Beer Press) and the novel *Total Oblivion, More or Less* (Ballantine/Spectra). He lives in Minnesota.

## Grandmother Ash by Michele Bannister

1.

Trudging after her anguish, soberly, soberly;  
the long path past Laetoli, hand in hand,  
planting footsteps for fickle-following children,  
passing by thirteen hundred grandmothers later:  
the volcano's gift, sign of two feet on a long walk.  
Seeds buried in sudden ash.

2.

Smoke-stained hand on the wall;  
gazing from a cave's high aerie in Gibraltar,  
scanning the forested plains for smoke,  
searching out the sparkle of distant sea.  
Four hundred grandmothers that hearth sat hushed,  
waiting the scuff of careful fingers.  
A last trace of fire's ash, grandmother,  
a gift in the crumbs of charcoal:  
embers eking out the clock of hours and days.

3.

Breaking the valley-camp as the wind brought grit,  
heralding eruptions out of Campania,  
the carried chill of unsought winter—  
such care, in folds and wraps of skin,  
packing away the present.

4.

Watching ash fall over Akrotiri, smudging mosaics,  
crisp azure disappearing tile by tile,  
every laugh-leaping dolphin down under dust.  
In departure, losing, leaving, one little gold ibex,  
pushed down under pumice.

5.

Walking the dark flows south of Vesuvius,  
there her hand cast in sudden starkness—  
grained nail-beds limned in lime,  
still holding on to hope.

---

Michele Bannister lives in Australia, where she is working towards her doctorate in astronomy. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons* and *Stone Telling*, and is forthcoming in *Ideomancer* and *Goblin Fruit*. See her work at: <http://www.mso.anu.edu.au/~micheleb/poetry.html>





## On the Island Where I Come From

Fiction by Nin Andrews

*“St. Julio’s promise, complete with a money-back guarantee: all its graduates marry once and forever.*

*As part of their education, boys who attend St. Julio’s participate in seven wedding ceremonies per week.”*

St. Julio’s Finishing School is the Island’s elite academy for boys. Any boy who wishes to attend St. Julio’s must have his blood tested to determine whether he possesses the right genetic material.

Only St. Julio’s boys are destined to become true paragons of their gender, capable of mastering the fine art of marital bliss. St. Julio’s promise, complete with a money-back guarantee: all its graduates marry once and forever.

As part of their education, boys who attend St. Julio’s participate in seven wedding ceremonies per week. The back rooms and wings of the school serve as sanctuaries where simultaneous weddings take place every day except Mondays, a day designated for sanitation and janitorial training. All St. Julio’s graduates are trained as chefs, servers, dishwashers, and janitors in addition to marital training.

Each student develops a special ceremonial skill. Those who are good with their hands become either calligraphers and compose hand-lettered wedding invitations or seamstresses who design wedding dresses and suits. These boys are often seen attending to the last-minute clothing emergencies for members of the wedding parties.

Boys with artistic flare learn to arrange flowers, hair, and makeup, and are often expected to apply the finishing touches to the bridal party’s faces and the traditional Island up-dos, complete with pearled barrettes, fake cherries, and gilded birds.

Musical students play the organ, or they sing or play the harp or the flute, while the cake is being cut and the champagne served.

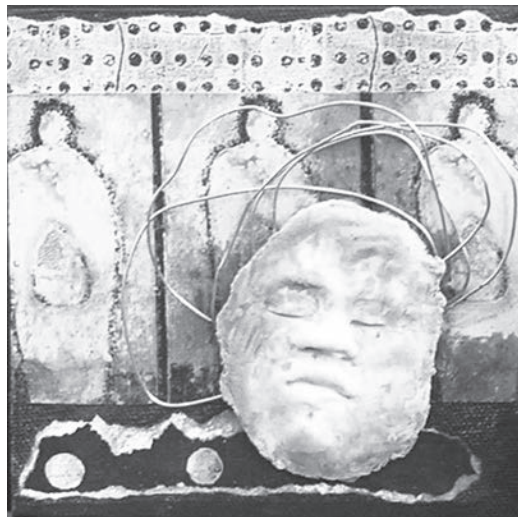
All students take turns filling the pews of sparsely attended weddings, a practice they continue long after leaving the academy. It is believed on the Island that the more witnesses, the stronger the couple’s vows.

The graduates of St. Julio’s love weddings so much, when they fall asleep at night they dream of the day that they, too, will walk down the aisle. Even in old age, they cry whenever they watch a groom kiss his bride. They know that this is the pinnacle moment of every man’s life on earth, that everything to follow is but a shadow or afterthought, and the beginning of his inevitable demise.

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Nin Andrews is the editor of a book of translations of the French poet Henri Michaux entitled *Someone Wants to Steal My Name*, and she is the author of 5 chapbooks and 5 full-length books of poetry.



*Subconscious Rivalry*





# The Social Function of Property

by Care Santos

translated into English by Lawrence Schimel

There exists a place in the United States  
(Princeton, Chicago, Minneapolis, it doesn't matter)  
where they keep the 240 sheets  
into which Thomas Harvey, humanist pathologist,  
carefully divided Einstein's brain.  
It seems curious to me  
that there is always someone willing to investigate it,  
to again weigh it, measure it, compare  
those macabre fragments,  
looking for rarities and exceptions  
to the complex rule of life.  
As if they didn't know that  
we are all of us exceptions,  
each in their own skin  
and in their own way.

Some eminences of science  
study the pieces of Einstein's brain  
and extract portentous conclusions:  
the brain of a genius weighs 100 grams less  
than that of a mature man of his time;  
the brain of a genius generates fewer cells  
or lacks certain structures.  
We proudly offer this new data,  
the scientists proclaim, exhausted.  
For identical reasons, today  
I plan to leave my heart to science.  
I don't care if someone divides it into little pieces  
if it is someone with merit and tact  
(the fact that in life I offer  
my viscera to anyone  
justifies, albeit tardily,  
any intention of correction).  
And I wouldn't care either  
to know that someone placed it between glass  
or vacuum sealed it  
as they do with liverwurst.  
It's even possible that I enjoy  
knowing that its slices  
awaken enthusiasm, scientific or not,  
among people who are solvent and with a future.

And especially  
if someone cares  
to know if my heart is different from others,  
if it weighs more or less, if it lacks a valve,  
if it murmurs or if it wheezes.  
It could be that you're asking yourself  
what moves me to such a maneuver.  
Well then, and with this I conclude:  
I feel my heart  
is worth studying (forgive my hubris)  
for the same reason  
that Einstein's brain interests the experts.  
That's why I don't mind sharing it with all,  
nor for the world to keep it in an archive  
or in a laboratory,  
nor even if its 200 fragments are classified  
with the highest bibliographic rigor,  
I'm even willing to authorize  
that one part of the organ in question  
be available on loan  
(available, of course, to any patron  
with a card; no exceptions).  
After all,  
I am no longer going to use it any more  
but I continue believing  
in the social function of property.

---

Care Santos was born just north of Barcelona, Spain. She has published six novels, six collections of short stories, two collections of poetry, and a great many books for children and young adults. She gives literary workshops in Spain and the Americas, and serves as a literary critic for the national Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*.

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Lawrence Schimel is an award-winning author, anthologist, and translator living in Madrid and writing in both Spanish and English. He has published over 90 books in a wide range of genres. His work frequently deals with gay and lesbian, and Jewish themes.



## ☼ Reflecting Upon Ursula K. Le Guin's *Tehanu*

*Tehanu* by Ursula K. Le Guin, Atheneum, 1990, 226 pages

Reviewed by Hiromi Goto

"I want to talk about *Tehanu* as a text of ideas, rather than a book from a series, and rather than a conventional review I would like to offer a kind of articulated musing upon how a story about women can be written, how narrative is shaped, and the questions that come to mind when I read and think about this novel."

There are certain books I return to for rereading—some for solace, some for courage, others for intellectual stimulation and inspiration. These books are like old friends; they are familiar and dependable, yet my rereading of them is not a static deciphering of a fixed text. As I age and decode through a richer layer of experience, so my understanding of these texts shifts and deepens.

I want to talk about *Tehanu* as a text of ideas, rather than a book from a series, and rather than a conventional review I would like to offer a kind of articulated musing upon how a story about women can be written, how narrative is shaped, and the questions that come to mind when I read and think about this novel.

For those who are unfamiliar with Le Guin's writing and the Earthsea series, some sort of context is in order. *Tehanu* is the fourth book of a cycle of books, and it is likely best to read the first three books before coming to this one, although a part of me wonders if the novel could stand on its own in some way.

The Earthsea cycle is a fantasy series about the fictional archipelago Earthsea, a world of islands, magic, and connections with dragons. The peoples are technologically "preindustrial," and most travel is carried out on foot, or by ships and boats. The teaching and controlling of magic lies in the hands of men who can study at a special school on the island of Roke. Only men can become wizards; women can only be witches. The witches are valued at the communal level as healers and midwives, but the village witch can also be seen as a figure who cannot be entirely trusted. The initial trilogy follows the adventures of Ged, who ends up becoming a great Mage; Tenar, a Kargish priestess whom Ged encounters on one of his adventures; and Arren, a prince who sets out with Ged to discover what is bringing darkness and evil into their world.

I first read the Earthsea trilogy sometime in the '80s, I think. I quite enjoyed it, but *Tehanu* shone for me as a narrative separate and distinct and continues to speak to me on different levels.

*Tehanu* is a story about the lives of women and girls in a world where men hold power. It is that simple and that complex. In *Tehanu* we return to the life of Tenar, living as a middle-aged widow on a farm. She had left the world of magic and power (as described in the first three novels) to live a humble yet respectable life as a farmer, a wife, and a mother. The story opens with a terrible maiming of a girl, Therru, whom Tenar cares for and adopts as her own.

In a world of men, how can women and girls live with safety and prosperity? How do women become fully realized persons beyond the constraints of gender?

I must admit that I have railed at Le Guin in my readings of *Tehanu*. Why, I've entreated, have you scripted a world system that sets women as secondary to men? When you have such a wide canvas, why do you choose to write a narrative that describes the power of women as, "Weak as woman's magic, wicked as woman's magic?" Yet even as I've railed at the social powerlessness of the women within the novel, I have marveled at the care with which Le Guin has described the slow movements of women's lives informed not only by political and social structures created by men, but also by the turns of the seasons, and the reality of distance. How far can a child walk in a day? How can a woman and child journey safely from one village to another?

What stands out as remarkable for me is that *Tehanu* is not a fantasy adventure that sees heroes embarking on great journeys of discovery in order to save the world, but that it is about the smaller and more tightly detailed lives of women and children being heroic in small and modest ways. Le Guin has

Grandmother Magma



shifted from the broad, sweeping framework of fantasy into a rendering of heroism without fanfare. It is the heroism of mothers caring for children, the heroism of a child's capacity to endure and thrive after trauma, the heroism of women caring for other women; it is the heroism of maternal love. Le Guin does not cast these moments as heroic in the romantic sense; her gaze is unflinchingly realistic and unadorned. The domestic is not sacred; however, the domestic is treated with the same respect as, say, classic epic fantasy, and the author shows that, yes, even in the domestic there are moments of great beauty, horrific drama, and acts of bravery....

I love middle-aged and "powerless" Tenar as a great figure of heroism. Another aspect of *Tehanu* that I have found remarkable is the way in which the narrative unfolds. Le Guin, again, does not follow the conventions of epic fantasy structure. The heroes do not embark on an epic journey only to return home at the end of the quest. Tenar and Therru actually walk back and forth between, mostly, two distant villages. The movement of the narrative is not the "traditional" (or, perhaps, patriarchal) upward climb and descent model that is followed by a great many plots. Rather, it is back and forth, or perhaps, circular. It seems to emulate the turn of seasons, an ebb and flow—cycles, rather than trajectory. And this speaks to me of a feminist form, one that is not hierarchical in modality, but relational. Certainly there are struggles and villains to be dealt with within the plot, but the emphasis is less on vanquishing and more on the interconnectedness of people to each other and their relationships with their communities. Instead of asking, "How do we win?" the text moves toward, "How do we live?" Le Guin shows us with great care how women and girls can live....

Ultimately, Le Guin reveals that the power of men and Mages in the Earthsea cycle is a flawed power—a power that has them disconnected and distinct, rather than integrated and whole. If Tenar has left behind this false world of power in order to choose a life of farmer,

wife, and mother, it is because she sees in these roles something enduring and meaningful.

All books cannot be all things, and if there is one thing that I see *Tehanu* as lacking it is any representation of women who choose women over men. I can well imagine many witches as bisexual or lesbian. But what it does offer it offers very well, in a quiet and unblinking way. Le Guin does not envision the magic of women as weak and wicked; she has written a tale that depicts the quiet heroism of women and girls living in a world that perceives them as so—a world very much like our own.



*"...the author shows that, yes, even in the domestic there are moments of great beauty, horrific drama, and acts of bravery."*

*"In a world of men, how can women and girls live with safety and prosperity? How do women become fully realized persons beyond the constraints of gender?"*

*"What stands out as remarkable for me is that Tehanu is not a fantasy adventure that sees heroes embarking on great journeys of discovery in order to save the world, but that it is about the smaller and more tightly detailed lives of women and children being heroic in small and modest ways....a rendering of heroism without fanfare."*

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Hiromi Goto's novel *The Kappa Child* earned the James Tiptree, Jr., Award. Her latest YA publication, companion book to the award-winning *Half World*, is *Darkest Light*. Her website is <http://www.hiromigoto.com>.





## Versatility, Heartbreak, and Joy

*At the Mouth of the River of Bees*, by Kij Johnson, Small Beer Press,

September 2012, 300 pages, \$16.00

Reviewed by Victoria Garcia

*"Johnson writes with glorious precision about the emotional lives of fox spirits, empresses, cats, and small children, all with equal flair... moving with apparently effortless grace between mainstream literary fiction and space opera, folklore-based fantasy and metafiction."*

*At the Mouth of the River of Bees* is a stunning new collection from Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner Kij Johnson. A versatile artist with a clean and careful style, Johnson writes with glorious precision about the emotional lives of fox spirits, empresses, cats, and small children, all with equal flair. She shows the same fluency with genre, moving with apparently effortless grace between mainstream literary fiction and space opera, folklore-based fantasy and metafiction.

Johnson's facility with different genres leads to some interesting moments of blending. "The Man who Bridged the Mist," which won the 2012 Nebula Award for best novella, is a particularly interesting example of this. Set in a fantastical port town on the edge of a thick-fogged sea full of monsters, it ably engages traditionally hard sf themes of engineering, material science, the human cost of technology. The result is a beautiful exploration of the relationship between a large-scale public works project and the community it is meant to serve. Another luminous hybrid, "Names for Water," is a quiet and subtle mainstream literary story with a lovely hint of spacefaring sf at its core.

As fascinating as the genre blending is, the pure science fiction stories are perhaps the most intriguing. They are also among the grimmest. "Spar," which won the 2010 Nebula Award, is the most harrowing of the lot. In it, a human being and an alien, forced to live in a tightly confined space together and lacking a shared language, interact by continuously penetrating each other's bodies. An exploration of alienness, personal autonomy, eroticism, and the limits of communication, it is as sharp and thought-provoking as it is horrifying. "Dia Chjerman's Tale," another interstellar piece, shows what could happen

when an empire with great power is able to communicate only in limited bursts and with a lag of decades. In this gorgeously balanced story, storytelling and folklore provide a way for human beings to live in an unspeakably brutal milieu.

Indeed, many of the best pieces in the collection are stories about storytelling.

Though metafiction is often (justifiably) seen as self-indulgent and turbid, in Johnson's hands it is translucent and compelling. In "The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles," a small feline refugee journeys through cities, mountains, and farmland searching for a home. She knows that she has found it when she meets another cat that she can tell her stories to. In "The Evolution of Trickster Stories Among Dogs of the North Park After the Change," abandoned pet dogs, having learned to speak, begin to develop folklore in order to make sense of the perplexing and hostile human world. The most metafictional of the group, "Story Kit," is an intriguingly fractured account of how a writer uses myth and legend to work personal loss into fiction. Fascinatingly, the piece's fragmentary nature only heightens both its tension and its emotional weight.

Not everything in the collection is dark. Johnson is also capable of great tenderness and whimsy. In "26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss," which won the 2009 World Fantasy Award, a woman in crisis finds her place in life by running a travelling magic act in which a collection of macaques, marmosets, and others appear, mysteriously, from a bathtub suspended above a stage. And "At the Mouth of the River of Bees," which is about a surreal road trip and a woman's bone-deep connection with her aging dog, depicts a world of love, inexplicable magic, and healing.

Johnson is perhaps most famous for her work with Japanese folklore. (Her



two novels, 2000's *The Fox Woman*, and 2003's *Fudoki*, are both set in historical Japan.) Fans of this part of Johnson's body of work will not be disappointed. "Fox Magic" is a story about a fox maiden who lures a local nobleman into living with her in imaginary splendor in a burrow beneath a storehouse in his own kitchen garden. From these counterfeit surroundings, the possibility of real love and real desolation spring. In "The Empress Jingu Fishes," a young imperial wife deals with war, loss, and the will of capricious gods. The collection also includes an exploration of Chinese history and mythology. "Chenting, in the Land of the Dead," is about a low-level bureaucrat in medieval China who, unable to find another suitable position, chooses to accept a posting outside the world of the living.

While the majority of the stories in the collection were published in the last fifteen years, a few from Johnson's early career are included. Though worthwhile and interesting, not all of these shine as brightly as the later work. "Wolf Trapping," published in 1989, is occasionally hard to follow and has a rather opaque ending. And "Schrödinger's Cathouse," from 1993, is more clever than compelling.

Still, taken as a whole, this book is a delight. Deeply engaging on every level, it is highly recommended for all readers of *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*.

"...taken as a whole, this book is a delight. Deeply engaging on every level, it is highly recommended for all readers of The Cascadia Subduction Zone."

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

## Mars Exploration Unexamined

*Working on Mars: Voyages of Scientific Discovery with the Mars Exploration Rovers*

by William J. Clancey, MIT Press, August 2012, 310 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by Karen Burnham

For a book with a title as general as *Working on Mars*, William J. Clancey's book is actually very narrowly focused. Clancey is most interested in the psychological adjustment that comes when scientists' work is mediated through robotic rovers on another planet. He touches on the language used by the scientists (when they say "We're on Mars, we're doing things" as opposed to "The rover is on Mars, doing things"). He notes that geology is at its heart a field science, where researchers actively look forward to seeing a landscape first hand. It might seem that working at such a remove would be limiting and of less interest, but of course the geologists working on the Mars mission throw themselves into the rovers' work with enthusiasm.

However, the things that amaze Clancey are things that many readers will take for granted: i.e., the anthropomorphism and identification with the rovers Spirit and Opportunity. Frankly,

it's harder to imagine a world where the researchers would scoff at mere robots doing this work and refuse to identify with them, especially since sending astronauts to Mars isn't in the cards right now. Given that these "adaptive" behaviors seem as natural as stepping over a crack in the sidewalk, Clancey does little to shed much psychological insight into these phenomena.

*Working on Mars* exists in an uncomfortable limbo between a scientific book for the specialist and a popular book for the general public. We get some history of the various Mars exploration missions, but little description of the Rovers themselves. Clancey throws around terms like PDR and CDR (preliminary and critical design reviews) without explaining why they're important (anyone working on a NASA or other large engineering project would be familiar with them), but also takes the time to remind the reader that robots currently in operation

"Clancey is most interested in the psychological adjustment that comes when scientists' work is mediated through robotic rovers on another planet."

"Working on Mars exists in an uncomfortable limbo between a scientific book for the specialist and a popular book for the general public."

Cont. on p. 12



## Mars Exploration (cont. from p. 11)

*“Clancey incorporates an ethnographic approach to his research, including biographical snippets and extensive interviews with some of the people involved in the mission, and these voices are the strongest part of the book.”*

aren't sentient. He insists on using the acronym MER (Mars Exploration Rover) instead of referring to “the rovers.” And Clancey repeatedly mentions the “virtual reality” tools used by the team, but without any particular description of those tools. It appears that he means the photographic mosaics that the teams assembled to get a more comprehensive view of the landscape surrounding each rover—probably not what the term “VR” evokes in readers' minds.

Clancey incorporates an ethnographic approach to his research, including biographical snippets and extensive interviews with some of the people involved in the mission, and these voices are the strongest part of the book. As is common in NASA, older participants tend to be men, and younger (less powerful) voices belong to women. Clancey unfortunately doubles down on this by focusing a large part of his attention on Steven Squyres, the principal investigator on the Rover missions, and almost none on Joy Crisp, the principal scientist (Clancey's attempts to explain the difference are almost hilariously inept). This is likely inevitable given that Squyres has written about the Spirit and Opportunity missions already (excerpts from which make it clear that the general reader should read that book, *Roving Mars: Spirit, Opportunity, and the Exploration of the Red Planet* instead of this one), but I would have liked to hear more of Crisp's take on things.

The interviews also hint at questions that I'm interested in but Clancey clearly isn't: engineering team dynamics and getting a room full of very smart people to all pull together. The rover missions have been remarkably successful, outlasting their original designed lifetimes by years and returning a wealth of new information. So in one way this is a case study of running an excellent project, and Clancey points out that most scientists involved regard it as the height of their careers. However, when asked to complete the sentence: “Working with the Mars rovers is \_\_\_\_\_” many of the scientists filled in the blank with “frus-

trating.” I would have loved to see more investigation of that tension.

As a general reader, or even as a NASA reader looking for “lessons learned” to apply to other projects, this is an unsatisfying book. It is awkwardly written and focused on very specific questions that are narrowly tailored to Clancey's specialty in Human and Machine Cognition. He tends to treat the humans involved in a distanced and rather abstract way. There are interesting tidbits here for those with a specific interest in the current and future program of Mars exploration in specific, and human-machine partnerships in general. Still, I think I'll be picking up Steven Squyres's book, which seems to tell a more human and personal story of the mission, as soon as I can track down a copy.

*“As a general reader, or even as a NASA reader looking for ‘lessons learned’ to apply to other projects, this is an unsatisfying book.”*

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Karen Burnham is vocationally an engineer and avocationally a fiction reviewer. She works at NASA Johnson Space Center as an electrical engineer. She edits *Locus* magazine's *Roundtable* blog.

*“...when asked to complete the sentence: ‘Working with the Mars rovers is \_\_\_\_\_’ many of the scientists filled in the blank with ‘frustrating.’ I would have loved to see more investigation of that tension.”*





## Interrogating the River of Truth

*Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana,*

edited by Anil Menon and Vandana Singh, Zubaan Books, 2012, 338 pages, Rs 395

Reviewed by Rochita Loenen-Ruiz

One would expect that reviewing an anthology would be a simple matter of reading it and then writing down what one thinks. With *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana*, edited by Anil Menon and Vandana Singh, things are not so simple.

In her introduction, Vandana Singh says that the stories in this anthology are not retellings. She refers to them as “*distributaries of the great network of rivers that is the Ramayana tradition.*”

Of the twenty-five stories in this book, the majority are penned by authors who grew up with the *Ramayana* as part of their cultural life. It is a point worth appreciating, because I think only writers with a good grasp on an existing work and an understanding of the culture in which it originates can seek to extrapolate on or interrogate it.

The *Ramayana* tells about life in India around 1000 BCE and offers models in dharma. Its hero, Rama, lived his whole life by the rules of dharma; in fact, that is why Indians consider him heroic. When Rama was a young boy, he was the perfect son. Later he was an ideal husband to his faithful wife, Sita, and a responsible ruler of Ayodhya.

*Breaking the Bow* opens with Kuzhali Manickavel’s “The Ramayana as an American Reality Television Show.” Manickavel is brilliant in her handling the subject of Suparnakha’s mutilation on modern real-time television and the supposed internet response to it. Her writing is pitch-perfect and her prose shines.

Manickavel has an ear for dialogue; it is quite easy to imagine an interview with a celebrity saying something like this:

Admin: So no regrets?

Lakshmana: Absolutely not. I mean if I cut a rakshasi, she probably deserved it.

Manickavel’s brilliant tale is followed by Neelanjana Banerjee’s “Exile,” which has a surreal aspect to it for all that it is science fiction. In this story, the mutilation of Suparnakha also comes under consideration, but this time as a role-play meant to satisfy some sort of twisted need in the protagonist’s customers. There is an underlying commentary here, intentional or otherwise, on media’s portrayal of and the audience’s enjoyment of violence against women.

There is much to comment on and much to interrogate when one takes on an epic like the *Ramayan*. In her article “Rama and Ramayana: Lessons in Dharma,” Jean Johnson (University of New York) notes that “boys are told to be like Rama and girls are admonished to be like Sita.”

In Abha Dawesar’s science fiction tale, “The Good King,” Rama and Sita’s relationship is idealized, and Ravana is shown as being envious and desirous of sharing a connection with Sita, even if this connection is realized with Ravana taking the form of Rama. Julia Rosenthal’s “The Mango Grove” portrays Rama’s and Sita’s devotion to each other as a source of jealousy for the butterflies, who also desire to love as Rama and Sita do.

Indrapramit Das’s “Sita’s Descent” is a science fictional imagining of Sita as an artificially intelligent creation inspired by the Sita of the *Ramayana*. When Sita gains a will of her own she proceeds to exile herself as the original Sita did.

This is what she says to her creator:

“Be silent, Lakshmi. I am Sita. And if I am to be exiled, I alone will make the decision this time.”

It is a strong statement: Sita takes the decision and the responsibility for her own life in her own hands.

*“Of the twenty-five stories in this book, the majority are penned by authors who grew up with the Ramayana as part of their cultural life.”*

*“...only writers with a good grasp on an existing work and an understanding of the culture in which it originates can seek to extrapolate on or interrogate it.”*

*“There is much to comment on and much to interrogate when one takes on an epic like the Ramayan.”*



## River of Truth (cont. from p. 13)

"[T]he anthology has succeeded in bringing us stories that are fresh and vivid and resistant to pigeonholing regardless of the fact that they employ elements that make us classify them as science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, or slipstream."

"These stories remind us yet again that the truths that we have been fed through epics and myths and traditional beliefs are not the only truths."

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In Mary Anne Mohanraj's "The Princess in the Forest," a modern day woman finds herself trapped in a marriage where she has lost love and respect for her husband. I found this to be a particularly moving tale, as it speaks to the experience of migrant women who find themselves unable to leave their marriages because of cultural and familial restraints.

At one point Samiksha, the main character, asks herself:

"If she had never studied math, never gone to England, who would she have married? Would she have become the perfect wife, the Sita of the story?"

There is no resolution to Samiksha's predicament, but Mohanraj's ending leaves us questioning where the true path to happiness lies. Is it in fulfilling the expectations of the ideal wife, or is the answer to be found elsewhere?

Swapna Kishore's "Regressions" is an sf rendition of the *Ramayana* wherein a futurist goes back in time to replace an agent at a gender fork.

"Pay attention," Seniormost said. "You know how important Sita was in shaping gender roles, right?"

Kishore's is perhaps one of the most satisfying stories in this anthology. It looks at the existing epic with a sharp gaze and questions the standards that boys and girls are raised to believe as proper. Is Rama indeed the ideal man? Should Sita submit to Rama as dictated by the script assigned to her, or is she justified in diverging from the scripted path and embracing all that it means to be Sita?

Vandana Singh's "Oblivion" is another satisfying tale. Singh's gender-shifting main character Vikram is hunting after a demon named Hirasor. Vikram likens the hunt for the demon to Ram's hunt for Ravana. "Oblivion" interrogates the standards to which Vikram holds himself (the standard of Ram in the *Ramayana*) and through this science fictional lens

makes us question Rama's single-minded devotion to the quest for "justice."

There is a poignant moment in "Oblivion" when Vikram reflects on Ram: "In the *Ramayana*, Ram braves all to recover his consort Sita from the demon Ravan. But near the end of the story he loses her through his own foolishness."

Other noteworthy stories are Aishwarya Subramanian's "Making," Tori Truslow's "Machanu Visits the Underworld," Lavanya Karthika's "Day of the Deer," Priya Sarukkai Chabria's "Fragments from the Book of Beauty," Sharanya Manivannan's "Petrichor," Lavie Tidhar's "This, Other World," and Manjula Padmanabhan's "The Other Woman."

Shweta Narayan's "Falling into the Earth" is the anthology's final story. It tells of a modern Rama and a modern Sita brought together in an arranged marriage. Sita tries to fit into the pattern of the faithful and proper wife, while Rama works hard and does what ideal husbands are supposed to do. Narayan packs quite a wallop in this story, and the ending is poignant and hopeful.

When writing in his introduction about the *Ramayana* and its various existing versions, Anil Menon speaks of the *Ramayana* tradition as that of departing from tradition.

If and how much the writers in this anthology have succeeded in departing from tradition is a question the reader must answer for herself.

While not all the stories in *Breaking the Bow* satisfied me, I do feel that the anthology has succeeded in bringing us stories that are fresh and vivid and resistant to pigeonholing regardless of the fact that they employ elements that make us classify them as science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, or slipstream.

These stories remind us yet again that the truths that we have been fed through epics and myths and traditional beliefs are not the only truths. Like their authors, who have poked and prodded at the *Ramayana*, we must also poke and prod until we find the paths leading us to our own stories.



## ☼ Bel Dames in an Outbreak of Peace

*Rapture: Book Three of the Bel Dame Apocrypha* by Kameron Hurley,  
Night Shade Books, October 2012, 372 pages, \$15.99

Reviewed by Mark Bould

*Rapture* returns us to Umayma, the setting of Kameron Hurley's Nebula-nominated and Golden Tentacle-winning *God's War* (2011) and its sequel, *Infidel* (2011). And to the brutal, sprawling (mis)adventures of the bisexual warrior Nyxnissa so Dasheem, also known as Nyx, a particularly humorless and unlikeable Tank Girl for the *Halo* generation.

Some four millennia before her story starts, diasporic humans sojourned on the moons of Umayma, while their scientist-magicians terraformed the planet. But after a thousand years, a catastrophe forced an early descent to the still-unhomelike world, causing the human genome to mutate. Among the consequences are shifters who can take on animal forms and magicians who can bend insects to their will. Although the colonists came from several worlds and established separate nations, their different cultures shared a common Islamic heritage. But two millennia of peaceful coexistence ended when war broke out between Nasheen and Chenja. Three hundred years later, it is still raging. In Nasheen, gynocratic authority is in the ascendant. Male children are bred to become soldiers and dispatched to the front lines when they are just fourteen years old. If they survive until they are forty, they are allowed to return. Very few do. Some even talk of the genocide of men.

Nyx starts *God's War* as a bel dame, one of the Nasheenan warriors charged with tracking down and executing deserters. She works hard and plays hard—drinking and screwing like Colin Greenland's Tabitha Jute, but with none of her charm. Her semiotic lineage can be traced back through Hothead Paisan and riot grrrl, through Ripley and Molly and Sarah Connor, to Jael and Jirel and, courtesy of the novels' science-fantasy setting on a (mostly) desert planet, to Leigh Brackett's Eric John Stark and C.L. Moore's Northwest Smith. And unlike

other contemporary “post-feminist” action heroines, the multimedia Laras and Alices, Nyx lives in a Jason Bourne-like world of gravity, momentum, and inertia, of bruising collisions and crunching impact, where no one ever outruns an explosion and in which bodies get mangled and people die (but not all of them as permanently as others).

A few dozen pages into *God's War*, Nyx, expelled from the bel dames in disgrace, turns bounty hunter. In each of the three novels, set at roughly seven-year intervals, she and her mercenary team accept a mission that will supposedly bring nearer an end to the war. Every time they are ground up in the machinations of factions within the royal court, the Bel Dame Council and the First Families. And every time, revenges and betrayals within the Umayma demimonde add insult—and injury—to injury. Throughout, Hurley's focus is so tight on her taciturn characters and on the immediate action that the bigger picture—plots and counterplots, cultural differences, personal backstories, political histories—often remains unclear. This is not a failure so much as a consequence of her rigorous adherence to the viewpoint of the embedded correspondent or the first-person shooter.

Nyx is clearly the product of a brutalizing culture and of particularly brutalizing experiences, but during the course of *Infidel* any empathy one might feel for her fades. Her relentless drive, which once seemed like a remarkable, even admirable, resilience, becomes remorseless. She is like Sarah Connor in the first half of *Terminator 2*. Only more so. And it slowly dawns on you that you are devouring the breakneck adventures of a grim and deadly sociopath.

*Rapture* begins some years later, with Nyx in self-imposed exile. Partially-healed and semi-retired, she lives with her childhood sweetheart in the home of

*“Rapture returns us to Umayma.... And to the brutal, sprawling (mis) adventures of the bisexual warrior Nyxnissa so Dasheem, also known as Nyx...”*

*“Hurley's focus is so tight on her taciturn characters and on the immediate action that the bigger picture—plots and counterplots, cultural differences, personal backstories, political histories—often remains unclear. This is not a failure so much as a consequence of her rigorous adherence to the viewpoint of the embedded correspondent or the first-person shooter.”*





## Outbreak of Peace (cont. from p. 15)

“Hurley’s writing...”  
often gives off a heady,  
juvenile tang. Her prose  
is not hardboiled, but  
her attitude is...”

“Rapture’s assorted  
political and personal  
closures confirm Hur-  
ley as an author with  
the confidence to know  
which generic plea-  
sures to offer and which  
to withhold.”

an old friend, surrounded by children. It is all very tenuous, but she allows herself to imagine it as her future. And so inevitably, she is called—and threatened and blackmailed and provoked—out of retirement one last time. Peace has broken out, and Nasheen is struggling to cope with the sudden influx of male veterans. The Queen wishes to abdicate, to dissolve the monarchy, and to replace it with a new kind of government. The Bel Dame Council is desperate to retain its power. A men’s advocacy movement is growing in numbers and strength. In Ras Tieg, a former reluctant ally is the secret head of the underground movement against anti-shifter prejudice, desperate to keep this conflict from spilling over into disastrous insurrection and bloody reprisal. And an old enemy, long thought dead, turns out to be central to the plans of various factions. He has, however, been kidnapped, and only one person, it seems, can bring him back. Nyx accepts the mission, of course, albeit for complex reasons, and soon she and a hastily thrown-together team are heading further and further north into the desert, to the two-kilometer-high semi-organic wall that marks the end of the world and on into the territories beyond. Familiar characters reappear and, after a coincidence or two too many, their stories find closure of one sort or another, while Nyx, who knows bone-deep that nothing is what it seems, gradually figures out how she is being played and by whom, and comes up with a last-ditch play of her own.

Among the obvious comparisons Hurley’s setting suggests are Jon Courtenay Grimwood’s *Arabesk* trilogy (2001–3) and G. Willow Wilson’s *Alif the Unseen* (2012). The latter comparison also brings into focus a nagging doubt that is never quite laid to rest: like Wilson, Hurley is concerned to display an Islam that is far from monolithic; but unlike Wilson, her violent stories often evoke the worst kind of neo-con stereotyping of Islamic culture as always, essentially, and inevitably characterized by war, cruelty, and betrayal. This is ameliorated to

a large extent by Hurley’s attention to varieties of custom and costume; but it nags away that this in turn might merely be an aspect of her brilliant eye for detail, demonstrated elsewhere, for example, by the attention she pays to boxers taping their hands before fights.

Hurley’s writing is never as precise as Grimwood’s, but also never as mannered, and although it evinces no trace of Wilson’s quietly didactic Young Adult tone, it often gives off a heady, juvenile tang. Her prose is not hardboiled, but her attitude is, right down to that faint edge of romanticism that is always there and constantly slipping out of reach. Sometimes her descriptions of Umayma’s insect-based technologies conjure up an image that’s a little bit too much like a bugpunk *Flintstones*. And sometimes her attempts to be hard-ass teeter over into camp; for example, in *Infidel* she writes, “When her mood moved from severe to foul she would tighten and release her fist on her desk the way she was doing now—tighten and release, tighten and release—as if she were strangling kittens one by one and dropping them into a pail at her feet.” But these are occasional missteps as, book by book, Hurley has become a better writer, more and more worth reading.

In *God’s War*, Hurley’s prose was at its most gnarly, full of twists and snags that suggested an author discovering the world she was writing about as she was writing about it. In each subsequent volume, the prose is more finely-tooled, the story flows more easily, and the world is more familiar; and *Rapture’s* assorted political and personal closures confirm Hurley as an author with the confidence to know which generic pleasures to offer and which to withhold.

But I kind of miss the gnarl. From partway through *Infidel*, the series has been crying out for a move off-world, sooner rather than later, not least to find out what the Christians are up to (I suspect nothing good). With Nyx’s tale apparently completed, Hurley might now give us that bigger picture and lay some doubts to rest.

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## Social Reproduction, Women's Work, and Anti-Classicism

*Revolution at Point Zero* by Silvia Federici, PM Press, September 2012, 208 pages, \$15.95

Reviewed by Maria Velazquez

*Revolution at Point Zero* collects the author's writing on social reproduction, women's work, and anti-classism. It also provides a fantastic introduction to the Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s, as well as the revolutionary role of women in the global commons. The great strength of this collection is its accessibility; Federici introduces and defines Marxist and anticolonial concepts with ease, highlighting the connections between these abstract theories and activist work. As this book moves through three key periods (1975-1984; 1999-2008; 2009-2011), Federici describes the mainstream feminists' and Leftists' response (or lack thereof) to the growing crises of care and revolutionary reproduction facing the antiglobalization movement.

In the first section, "Theorizing and Politicizing Housework," Federici argues that the feminist and Leftist movements in the US made a mistake in dismissing housework as a political project, and in dismissing the Wages for Housework movement as solely about money. Instead, Federici highlights the political salience of the concept of a wage, suggesting that connecting "women's work" to "waged work" destabilizes ideas of gender and emphasizes the role of unwaged reproductive and affective labor in supporting the flow of capital. She writes, "To have a wage means to be part of a social contract, and there is no doubt concerning its meaning: you work, not because you like it, or because it comes naturally to you, but because it is the only condition under which you are allowed to live..." (16). In contrast, housework and caretaking have become indelibly feminine, unwage-able "act[s] of love" women perform for their families, and not a kind of labor necessary for the creation of a workforce (16). The Wages for Housework movement specifically locates the home as a site

of class struggle, where the labor of the woman-as-helpmeet facilitates the paid labor of worker. "[C]apital," she writes, "has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking" (19), because the reproductive work of women in the home literally creates *more* workers, and guarantees the productivity of existing workers by numbing the effects of alienated labor on workers' psyches.

Federici connects the economic devaluing of housework and caretaking to the continued exploitation of immigrant women. She highlights the ways in which domestic workers and service providers have been consistently devalued as workers in their attempts to unionize and earn a fair wage. Powerfully, she suggests that this highlights one of the rhetorical gaps in the contemporary feminist movement in the West: when Western women enter the waged workforce as waged or salaried workers, they enter into an exploitative relationship with other women with less social power, whose labor, bodies, and time are considered unworthy of revolutionary theorizing. In the section containing these suggestions, "Globalization and Social Reproduction," she links the feminization of poverty to globalization and its attendant industrialization and exploitation of the Third World. She argues that globalization depends on the alienation of subsistence farmers, particularly women, from the land. She suggests that this is part of the current NGO emphasis on remaking women, normally the backbone of the resistance to this new form of colonization, into citizen-workers, dependent on microloans, imported foods, and underpaid domestic labor for their survival.

The third section, "Reproducing Commons," centers on resistance. Federici introduces eldercare and childcare as gaps in present Leftist analysis. She further ties these gaps to both globalization

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Cont. on p. 18



## Social Reproduction (cont. from p. 17)

“...each of Point Zero’s sections...provides an overview of the political moment in which she was writing along with a brief definition of the concepts with which she is working.”

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Maria Velazquez is a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park. She blogs for *The Hathor Legacy*, a feminist pop culture blog, and recently received the Winnemore Dissertation Fellowship from the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities. Maria is a Ron Brown Scholar and an alumna of Smith College.

and urbanization, describing the role of women in resisting an international collective “amnesia” (129) induced by corporations. The goal of this amnesia is to free up resources for the global marketplace. For example, instead of many small, family-owned farms raising food crops for local distribution/sale, the corporate vision is of one giant farm raising money crops for sale in the global marketplace. Women subsistence farmers have provided life’s basic necessities to populations abandoned to starve while grasping for the elusive dream of riches through globalized, industrialized labor. Women farmers have also been the backbone of antidevelopment movements countering the appropriation of land for corporate development and ecotourism. Federici particularly highlights the Landless Women Association in Bangladesh and the Peasant Women’s Commission in Paraguay, as well as the work of urban gardeners in New York City.

Federici has organized each of *Point Zero’s* sections so that it provides an overview of the political moment in which she was writing along with a brief definition of the concepts with which she is working. Also, because this is a themed collection, each concept is reintroduced and thoroughly explored. What is particularly interesting about this work is that the concerns Federici introduced in the 1970s section remain deeply contemporary. Her arguments regarding the political saliency of housework as a waged project continue to be incredibly relevant, particularly when one considers the rising fixation on the “domestic goddess” as a post-ironic, postfeminist fantasy, the erasure of agency on the part of women of color domestics in period pieces like the 2011 film *The Help*, and the continued refusal of the Occupy! movement to engage with native sovereignty or anticolonialism as vital political projects.

## 🌀 The Heiresses’ Achievements

*Heiresses of Russ 2012: The Year’s Best Lesbian Speculative Fiction*, edited by Connie Wilkins and Steve Berman, Lethe Press, October 2012, 302 pages, \$18 trade paperback/\$25 library binding/\$8.99 ebook

Reviewed by Cynthia Ward

“I cannot claim that the works in *Heiresses of Russ 2012* reach the heights of *Russ’s* best fiction. But the stories are all superior works, making this anthology a necessity for the library of any fan of speculative fiction, literary fiction, or feminist fiction.

The year 2012 brings us the second volume of *Heiresses of Russ*, an anthology series that collects the year’s best lesbian speculative fiction, named in honor of the genre’s pioneer, Joanna Russ. A leading feminist and academic, and one of *SpecFic’s* first out lesbians, the late Russ was a searingly brilliant, angry, acclaimed, and insightful critic, essayist, theorist, satirist, novelist, and short story writer. Clearly, living up to Russ’s legacy poses a staggering challenge for both the anthology’s coeditors, Connie Wilkins and Steve Berman, and its contributors, as Wilkins’ informative Introduction acknowledges.

The fiction kicks off with strength and charm in the literary steampunk opener, “In Orbit,” from Katherine Fabian, a writer previously unknown to me. The tale eschews the Anglo-Christian-Victorian default of too many steampunk

works as the Jewish main character, apprentice golem-maker Sarah, seeks a husband among the sons of a family friend, and favors instead the daughter.

With steampunk all the rage, it’s unsurprising that the anthology includes two other examples. More surprisingly, these stories also buck the Anglo-Christian-Victorian trend. In first-time writer S.L. Knapp’s slightly uneven but entertaining “Amphitrite,” the mermaids are singing, but not each to each. Instead, these carnivorous Caribbean sirens lure men to their deaths, and one targets a Cuban woman submarine engineer/pilot for a more ambiguous fate.

The best steampunk contribution is not only the anthology’s best story, but one of the year’s best works of the fantastic: “To Follow the Waves,” from relative newcomer Amal El-Mohtar. In an





alternate Dimashq (Damascus), dream-crafters make dreams to order. When one dreamcrafter becomes smitten with an unknown woman glimpsed by chance, she begins working that desire into her dream-gems, with unexpected results. It's tempting to say that with this story, the Rhysling Award-winning and Nebula Award-nominated author has crafted a gorgeous and wondrous dream-gem; but that would utterly fail to convey the graceful complexity of her protagonist and setting, or the sensuous beauty of her prose.

Though not achieving that pinnacle, the remaining contributions generally range from very good to excellent. Among the finest are Anna Meadows's magic realist "La Caida," in which Latina vigilante-vampires encounter a fallen angel; Hugo Award winner David D. Levine's gently romantic urban fantasy "The Tides of the Heart," in which a commitment-phobic plumber encounters an undine; Desirina Boskovich's subtly wrought coming-of-age fantasy "Thirteen Incantations," rich in evocative sensory detail; and Nalo Hopkinson's nuanced and lyrical "Ours is the Prettiest," a *Bordertown* shared-world story with an uncommon complexity of multicultural layers.

I cannot claim that the works in *Heiresses of Russ 2012* reach the heights of Russ's best fiction. But the stories are all superior works, making this anthology a necessity for the library of any fan of speculative fiction, literary fiction, or feminist fiction. And, while there is one furious character within these pages, I cannot claim that these stories convey the anger that would have pleased Russ, who, as the Introduction notes, "expressed suspicion of feminists who were not angry." Still, I can't help expressing my own suspicion that the fierce founding mother of lesbian and feminist SpecFic would allow that this is a fine collection, and one reflective of the positive changes gained by later generations of women—gay and bisexual and straight, cisgender and transgender, feminist and nonfeminist—and the positive changes gained through the achievements and influence of Russ herself.

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

*"I can't help expressing my own suspicion that the fierce founding mother of lesbian and feminist SpecFic would allow that this is a fine collection, and one reflective of the positive changes gained by later generations of women...and the positive changes gained through the achievements and influence of Russ herself."*

## Gneiss-Mother

By Michele Bannister

Rush-risen in radiance, garnet-hearted gleam-giver,  
weatherworn world-wielder, collider of continents,  
crunch-crackler of margins with cackles of glee.

Pressed into permanence. Presumption  
leveled to a penneplain of politeness.

The basalt-boned hover between abeyance and asking:  
(really, how do you keep everything balanced?)  
Behold: brazen botherers broken-backed,  
bereft below mantled magma-melt majesty!

Scudded out to scattered syllables soapstone-clean,  
slickensides slip-shards in the bed of the river.

Living, an ever-falling-orbit's dance,  
the art of abandoned control, fickle in grace.

Be stone. Be faceted, deep-core, be fissile and faithful;  
be friable, fire-fallow, fault-febrile, facetious;  
be water-worn to glory, when all the world may look,  
when diapir-deep beneath the ground,  
when out in all the rain,  
be surface-shallow, be bedrock-bones for every little planet,  
be dust-bitten landscape lit by sudden-shafting light:

be beauty.





## Artist as Subject Pam Sanders

Pam Sanders is an eclectic artist who started with knitting and embroidery, and went on to drawing, painting, and anything to do with making art. Her work has been described as abstract expressionism. Myth, magic, ancient cultures, and fantasy novels are the inspiration for the art she creates.

Handsculpted polymer dolls got Pam into her first art gallery. She continues to use polymer in mixed media collages. Pam's current passion is an extension of the love of polymer and mixed media. She creates wearable art sculptures, each

designed and handcrafted by Pam from the pendant to the closure.

Pam's mixed media collages are made with handpainted papers, paint, spackle, polymer, and even egg shells. She uses PhotoShop to create one of a kind papers using old artwork and photos. Bold bright color and texture are used to create depth to the pieces.

To say Pam is obsessed with art is an understatement. She creates art daily and is constantly experimenting with new concepts and techniques.

[www.pamsanders-art.com](http://www.pamsanders-art.com)



*Family Portrait*

### the artist as subject

We start out our lives full of hopes and dreams and set ourselves on our chosen paths.

The world is laid out in front of us.

But we soon come to our first obstacle.

Do we go with the flow and follow in the footsteps of the others who have gone before  
and know the way,

or do we make our own way?

We try the accepted ways of those more experienced and plug ourselves into the matrix  
but find that this is not for us.

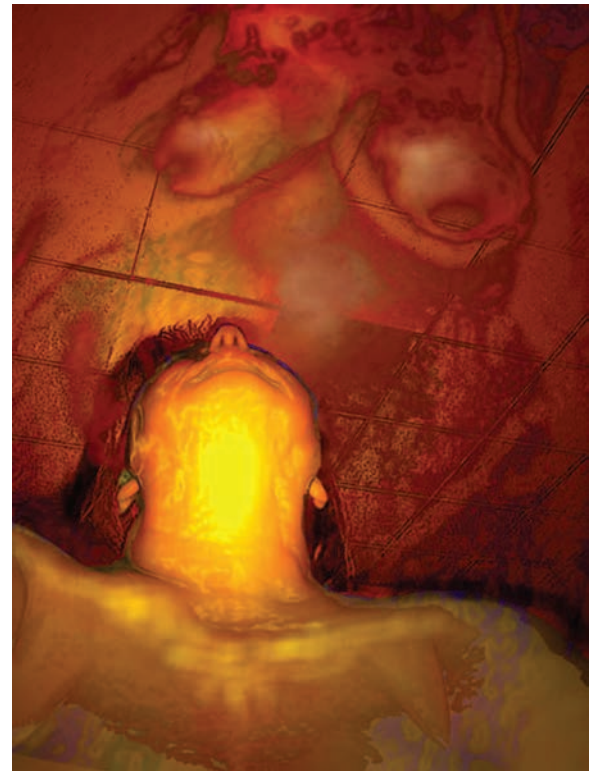
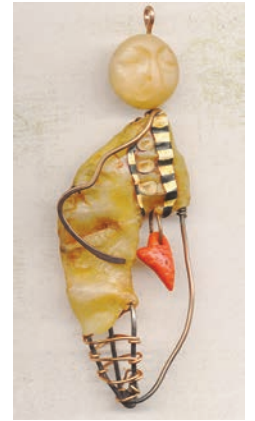
So, we step back and see the world anew,  
and we sing the body electric.



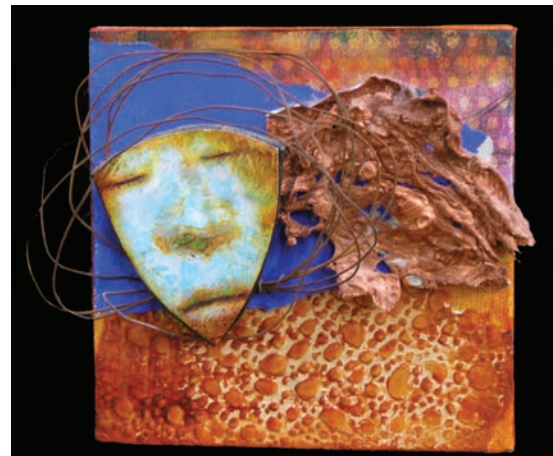




*The End of All Things*



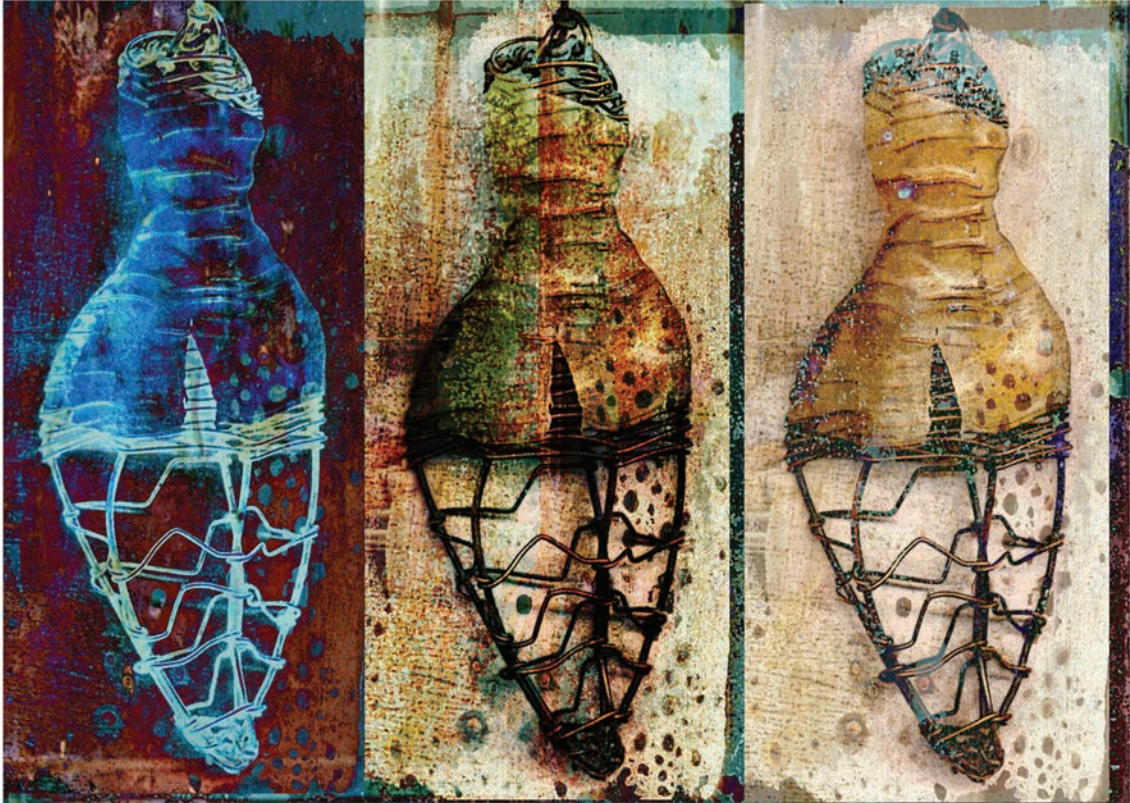
*I Sing the Body Electric*



*String Theory*







*Form Over Function*

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