

The Cascadia Subduction Zone-

A LITERARY
QUARTERLY

August 2012 © Vol. 2 Supplement

Joanna Russ — Outsider/Contrarian/Fighter Our Seismic Foundation



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DEDICATED TO JOANNA RUSS, AUGUST 2012

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Front Cover Photo: The Russ Collection of L. Timmel Duchamp

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Subscriptions and single issues online
at: www.thecsz.com

Print subscription: \$15/yr;

Print single issue: \$4 (supplement: \$5)

Electronic Subscription (PDF format):
\$10 per year

Electronic single issue: \$3

Cover banner collagraph of the Cascadia subduction zone by Marilyn Liden Bode

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Outsider, Creative Contrarian, Lesbian and Feminist Theorist

by L. Timmel Duchamp

This issue of *The Cascadia Subduction Zone* is supplemental, published without regard for our usual schedule and distributed free of charge to subscribers. For the editors, it's an exceptionally special issue we began planning shortly after Joanna Russ's death last year. When I think about Joanna Russ's relationship to feminism and feminist science fiction in general and to the work the *CSZ* aims to nurture and provoke in particular, Christine de Pizan's brilliant conceit of the City of Ladies comes to my mind. The medieval thinker constructed her "City" of every powerful, accomplished woman she knew of. Russ's work, always powerful and challenging, is more than a brick in the wall of our city, though; it is a substantial element of its foundation. Foundations are tricky things, especially in the seismic times in which we live. They are invisible to those paying only casual attention to the buildings they support. But for the inhabitants of any building, the foundation matters tremendously.

Most of Russ's oeuvre dates from the 1960s through the 1980s. Her last published work, *What Are We Fighting For?*, first published in 1998, was largely composed during the mid to late 1980s; illness prolonged the process of finishing the book. When *What Are We Fighting For?* finally appeared, it received little attention, dismissed by many as "dated" and no longer relevant. I recall numerous conversations in which I attempted to defend the book against such charges, often leveled by people who hadn't actually read it but simply wanted to explain why they had no interest in doing so. The book has never received much attention. The lack of attention is partly due to its being dismissed as "outdated." But partly it is due to the intractability of Russ's ideas, analysis, and arguments to simplification. And so I'm glad to offer you Alexis Lothian's essay about her own struggle with the book. Lothian begins by noting the difficulty of articulating her response to the work following Russ's death:

I made notes and marked pages,
but I never did blog; I simply

couldn't figure out what to say, how to boil things down, how to square the contradictory elements of my response. In writing this piece I'm attempting to do so, knowing already that I will fail. But every commentary on Russ's writings, just like every memorial I have read, suggests that such difficulty—never to be easily digested or simply reduced to a summary, either in person or in prose—was one of her most salient characteristics.

Since Russ's lesbian and feminist analyses and theory changed her life, as well as helped her develop her voice as a writer, and formed the backbone of her oeuvre, I also wanted to include an essay about her socialist-feminist and lesbian activist essays that appeared in a variety of feminist venues in the 1970s and early 1980s, a few of which were collected in *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts* (Crossing Press, 1985). Her essay "Not for Years But for Decades," in particular, has much to say about how profoundly feminist and lesbian consciousness changed her life and helped her find her voice. None of these essays has been reprinted in her non-fiction collections. A writer for whom those particular essays had been very important at the time they were published agreed to address those essays for this issue. In the end, though, she could not do it. She felt silenced, she wrote me, by her overwhelming sense that what she had to say would not be interesting to anyone today. This saddened me, but I thought I understood the problem. To a certain extent, the problem includes the difficulty Lothian faced, but with an added dimension that has not to my knowledge been explored. I do not believe that lack of reader interest lies at the heart of this silence. Rather, I think the problem is that it would be extremely difficult to convey to feminists today what those essays meant to feminists at the time they were published. A huge gulf of altered discursivity lies between then and now, a gulf that constrains and restricts intelligibility. This is not an unusual problem facing

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"Russ's lesbian and feminist analyses and theory changed her life, as well as helped her develop her voice as a writer, and formed the backbone of her oeuvre...."



Outsider
(cont. from p. 3)

"Russ's feminist theorization, as she notes repeatedly in those essays, more often derived from her own consciousness-raising than from analysis of and reflection on the body of feminist theory (to which her essays contributed) then current."

those reading work produced in years past. Work that survives for decades is seldom understood as it once had been, mostly because it is impossible to do so, given our loss of the cultural and discursive context in which it was produced. The work that does survive either acquires fresh meanings or is read consciously as historically situated. Occasionally the intelligibility of a work persists because it continues to be relevant through shifting contexts, as is the case with Russ's own *How To Suppress Women's Writing*, which has, if anything, become more widely intelligible than it was in 1983, when it was first published.

During a recent re-read of *Magic Mommas*, although I was acutely aware of that gulf of time and prompted to moments of intense recollection and historical contextualization, I also found portions of the book astonishingly relevant. It is, like much feminist writing of that day, intensely personal. Russ's feminist theorization, as she notes repeatedly in those essays, more often derived from her own consciousness-raising than from analysis of and reflection on the body of feminist theory (to which her essays contributed) then current. The point is important, and one that Russ never allowed to be muddied. In "News from the Front," in which she issued a warning about the hijacking of feminism via the Sex Wars, she makes a point that I fear has become long-lost:

In the late sixties and early seventies feminists didn't believe that the personal was political but that the personal led to the political—odd how the phrase has changed, no? Descriptive theories derived from personal experience have been replaced by prescriptive theories to which personal experience must conform. We have, in fact, developed a flourishing right wing in which feminist theory is rushing pell-mell ahead right into the nineteen-fifties.
(*Magic Mommas* 75-76)

Russ was not far off in talking about a "flourishing right wing" in feminist theory, given that later that decade several feminists enthusiastically collaborated with right-wing Reagan henchman/Attorney General Edwin Meese in his crusade for sexual purity.

I know from my conversations with Russ in the early 1990s that the muddling of the point that the personal leads to the political vexed her considerably. In "News" she warns against "feminine-ist biologism" and the dangers of mystification that essentialist forms of feminism was prone to. "Makeup, for example, is a feminist issue," she writes, "not because using makeup is anti-feminist and scrubbing your face is feminist but because makeup is compulsory. Those who don't see the distinction are building a religion, not a politics" (77). She also remarks, "I hope feminists will learn that a theory which describes only sexism is as incomplete as one that describes only class struggle. I hope that the biological theories will disappear and that feminists will learn that sex is an impersonal appetite and quite O.K. that way, but I wonder" (77).

The biological theories are still with us, alas. But I think we've made some progress toward fulfilling her other hopes. And the struggle to distinguish between religion and politics does not seem to be a problem now for feminists—though it is certainly a problem plaguing US politics at large, in which a small minority, using scorched earth tactics, has paralyzed the political process. But I personally have a clear memory of a time in the early 1980s when the tendency for many feminists to make feminism into a quasi-religious culture profoundly troubled my peace of mind.

In "Antagonisms," Farah Mendlesohn, editor of the outstanding collective work of scholarship, *On Joanna Russ*, takes on Russ's position within the field of science fiction. She identifies Russ as a "contrarian" in the field, challenging and disrupting comfortable narratives. She acknowledges that Russ "carved out a space" in the field that wasn't previously there, but doubts that she achieved actual, lasting change. We are still, she observes, fighting the same battles Russ fought, still struggling with the same issues. As a creative contrarian, Russ offered critiques, not programs. Her role was to destabilize, to effect a shift in values.

Our youngest contributor to this issue, Brit Mandelo, has had her long essay, *We Wuz Pushed: On Joanna Russ and Radical Truth-Telling* published this spring. She is widely known for writing posts on Russ's

"...the struggle to distinguish between religion and politics does not seem to be a problem now for feminists.... But I personally have a clear memory of a time in the early 1980s when the tendency for many feminists to make feminism into a quasi-religious culture profoundly troubled my peace of mind."



work for Tor.com, carefully reading and rereading every one of Russ's books. In "Alienation and 'the Other' in the Short Fiction of Joanna Russ," Mandelo traces a theme she find recurs throughout Russ's considerable body of short fiction. Russ's tales often depict Outsiders and insist, whether or not they are the story's protagonist, on recognizing their subjectivity in the face of social or political assumptions that render them "other." For Mandelo, this recurring theme is a unifying factor of Russ's entire oeuvre, "a powerful unifying concern that runs throughout like a river, on the surface at times and subterranean at others, but always present in some form."

Outsider, creative contrarian, and lesbian and feminist theorist: Russ was all of these and more. Russ is mostly remembered for her novels, her reviews, and her magisterial masterpiece, *How To Suppress Women's Writing*. With this issue, we hope to take readers to less familiar areas of Russ's work and continue the conversation Russ herself found so necessary and valuable.

"Russ's tales often depict Outsiders and insist, whether or not they are the story's protagonist, on recognizing their subjectivity in the face of social or political assumptions that render them 'other.'"



L. Timmel Duchamp is the author of the Marq'ssan Cycle and two collections of short fiction, *Love's Body*, *Dancing in Time* and *Never at Home*. She is also the founder and publisher of Aqueduct Press.





Antagonisms

by Farah Mendlesohn

“Russ is not an entry-level writer.... Russ’s science fiction is... rooted in other science fiction. While one can of course read Russ cold, to get the most out of her work one needs to have read Fritz Leiber, Robert Heinlein, Philip K. Dick, and a range of other [male] writers who are quite likely to annoy, irritate, or offend the modern female reader.”

“Russ departs from the ‘slick’ style of 1950s science fiction and sits firmly with the New Wave experimenters who... moved from playing with the lego bricks of English to deploying them as carefully targeted missiles, frequently forcing the reader to reconsider what an apparently simple sentence means.”

“I doubt if reading a Russ novel ever brought a reader into feminism: Russ began where many people rested.”

Joanna Russ’s influence in science fiction is a subtle and complex matter to consider. Unlike the work of Ursula Le Guin, relatively few stories of Russ bring female readers into the field. Russ is not an entry-level writer (that is not to tarnish Le Guin, but Le Guin’s talent is almost precisely in building bridges from one set of interests—anarchism, perhaps—to science fiction). Russ’s science fiction is, as both Gary K. Wolfe and Edward James argue in *On Joanna Russ* (2009), rooted in other science fiction. While one can of course read Russ cold, to get the most out of her work one needs to have read Fritz Leiber, Robert Heinlein, Philip K. Dick, and a range of other [male] writers who are quite likely to annoy, irritate, or offend the modern female reader. The bitter coldness of *We Who Are About To...* (1977) makes more sense if one has read the endless Robinsonades in which humans re-launch the human race from a handful of survivors. The novel takes flight if one has read Marion Zimmer Bradley’s deceptively romantic *Darkover Landfall* (1972). Similarly (*Extra*) *Ordinary People* (collected 1984) is one of the earliest of the interstitial texts, dependent on our understanding of it as science fiction because we know the clues, even as Russ refuses (most of the time) to follow through. In the language of her fiction, Russ departs from the “slick” style of 1950s science fiction and sits firmly with the New Wave experimenters who took Heinlein’s arguments about the role of language in science fiction and moved from playing with the lego bricks of English to deploying them as carefully targeted missiles, frequently forcing the reader to reconsider what an apparently simple sentence means.

Similarly, I doubt if reading a Russ novel ever brought a reader into feminism: Russ began where many people rested. In *On Strike Against God* (1980), Russ challenges the liberal feminism of her period, which assumed that equality and personhood was defined by the dominant sex; in *The Female Man* (1975) she challenges the very notion of “two sexes” as usually

conceived in the debate, pointing out that only one part of the species was “sexed,” the other allowed to occupy a constructed neutrality. Russ was as angry at most feminisms as she was at the world in general: in *The Two of Them* (1978) she attacks liberal feminism and its illusions, and in *The Female Man* she points to the confines of two different modes of radical feminisms. This is material for the already-feminist. It is not evangelical.

Russ’s influence, whether as a reviewer or a writer, or as a *voice* in the sf world (and *voices* in our communitarian and discourse-driven world are very important), is essentially contrarian, just as her protagonists often served as *antagonists*, challenging and disrupting the careful narrative other characters thought they were constructing.

The role of voices in science fiction literature has not, to my knowledge, been studied. We acknowledge them: we know that writers such as Hugo Gernsback, Sam Moskowitz, John W. Campbell, Damon Knight, James Blish, Judith Merrill, David Hartwell, Samuel R. Delany, Ursula Le Guin, John Clute, among others, and more recently writers such as John Scalzi, Nalo Hopkinson, and Neil Gaiman make utterances that set the fanzines and now the Internet fluttering.

The *degree* to which these Voices shape the conversation is fairly visible, but the *ways* in which they shape it (imagine a circle being pulled and tugged into a stretched skin) is both too visible in the past to be easily studied—can we imagine the field without their intervention?—and in the present is clouded by the sheer number of directions in which the conversation is being pulled. Recent attempts to discuss this phenomenon emerge in the single author/editor studies of Emily Pohl-Weary (*Better to Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merrill*, 2002) or William H. Patterson (*Robert A. Heinlein: In Dialogue with His Century*, 2010), but these are classic intellectual histories that assume that the great and good will be listened to. More useful is the growing interest in fandom as a concept, but as a new area of study it is tend-



ing to concentrate on new fandoms. Even Helen Merrick's *The Secret Feminist Cabal* (2009) never really tackles this issue of why *some* voices, why *these* voices. Only in the internet discussions of Race-Fail and the growing discussion of women's and men's reception in debates about female exclusion is attention turning to the nature of the speech-act, which Russ herself identified in *The Female Man* in the interstitial tableaux and conversations that punctuate the text.¹

Russ's influence is visible: it is attested to by the reviews she wrote, discussed by Edward James, in *On Joanna Russ*. Simply by existing as a feminist reviewer she challenged a number of the complacencies which—sadly—still exist in the field: the way in which books were selected, the assumption that a mediocre book by a man was more worth reviewing than a good book by a woman, and the kinds of cardboard women substitutes that littered these texts. But my point is already made. All of these issues still exist within the field. Russ carved a space to talk about it, and along with other feminist writers, carved a space to write alternatives, but it is not clear that she achieved a change in the field *per se*. After she left reviewing, who replaced her? While fanzine criticism grew apace, and a clear space opened for feminist criticism in some of the academic journals, I can think of no feminist reviewer with a permanent column in the major pro-zines until the advent of *Strange Horizons*, although that itself may be significant if we go with my personal pet theory that we need to look for a person's or movement's real influence approximately twenty-five years after the event.

Russ's influence is visible through some of the essays she wrote; yet, too often it is the superficial lessons that are absorbed—most of us now avoid bad feminist utopias—while the issues Russ identifies in "Power and helplessness in the Women's Movement" (better known by the title of the collection, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts*, 1985) continue to bedevil many of our own organizations and cultures. As the interactions that characterized Race-Fail demonstrated, "niceness" and good intentions are too often seen as a substitute for the kinds of painful discussions that are needed and that Russ

advocated. This is compounded because, as a reviewer and an essayist, Russ was an essentially contrarian voice, challenging the way things were being done, but without an agenda. This is encapsulated in a moment in *The Female Man*. "Joanna" writes, "I committed my first revolutionary act yesterday. I shut the door on a man's thumb. I did it for no reason at all and I didn't warn him." (Women's Press edition, p. 203). For most writers and activists, a revolutionary act is one of evangelism, with reason and argument at its heart even if it is violent. Not here. Here it is angry critique.²

If Russ's essays are critiques not programs, the same can be said of much of her fiction. *The Female Man* is no *Scum Manifesto*. "When it Changed" is the best known story, and in this there *is* a program advocated—get rid of men and allow women to occupy all the niches of humanity—but this is utopia, and it may be because it is utopian and directive that it is remembered so vividly. In the fleshed-out version of Whileaway that we see in the novel, Russ, honest to the core, deliberately draws attention to the taboos and social demands that bedevil her Whileawayan representative, and in this novel, it is Jael the vindictive prophet and advocate, who stands out most vividly.

In the absence of utopia, in the presence of the world, Russ was unable to accept cosy complacencies: in one of her outstanding short stories, "Mr. Wilde's Second Chance," Oscar Wilde finds himself in a limbo, offered the chance to recreate his life through a jigsaw. Mr. Wilde, ever competent, does so, but rejects the perfection he creates, offering the challenge, *whose perfection?* Mr. Wilde's experience is at the heart of the fracturing of the women's movement, a fracturing Russ applauded in her critiques of socialist and liberal feminisms. This is why Russ is so contrarian: like Samuel R. Delany, perhaps her only contemporary to take the same stance, to reject the comforts of modernist philosophies, Russ does not accept that there is an answer: there are only more questions. One of her more neglected texts, but as may be evident, one of my favorites, *We Who Are About To...*, exemplifies this. There are many sf texts that argue about the relative values of life, but I can think of none other that argues that life is

"Russ's influence... is essentially contrarian, just as her protagonists often served as antagonists, challenging and disrupting the careful narrative other characters thought they were constructing."

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Antagonisms (cont. from p. 7)

"To maintain a contrarian stance and be creative is enormously difficult.... It is precisely the antagonists, those who rage and resist and insist it is their job to recognize what is broken, not to fix it, who unsettle and disturb with their awkward questions, and move entire systems in other directions."

essentially communal, and to be separated from the community is by necessity to reduce that value.³ I noted earlier that Russ writes antagonists, rather than protagonists, and *We Who Are About To* demonstrates what I mean. The protagonists are the narrator's companions in the crashed space ship. Determined to "re-start" the human race they engage in all the Robinsonade strategies we have learned over three centuries of this particular sub-genre. The narrator is an antagonist, she resists the premise of the plot—the human race is doing just fine without them—and resists the role in which she has been cast. Our narrator resists even being named; she renders herself invisible, recognizing that names are for communities; names are how others recognize us. The result is a novel that breaks down an entire trope but that cannot, by its very nature, recreate; it can only ask, *why are you still doing this?*

To maintain a contrarian stance and be creative is enormously difficult: when challengers to a system are labeled "shrill," this is often what is meant. Our political system claims to want to reward protagonists, those who suggest something new and "positive," but in reality, political protagonists often succeed only in setting up parallel universes of cultural existence, highly valuable but often marginalized—see the very realistic *Native Tongue* by Suzette Haden Elgin (1985). It is precisely the antagonists, those who rage and resist and insist it is their job to recognize what is broken, not to fix it, who unsettle and disturb with their awkward questions, and move entire systems in other directions. James Tiptree Jr. is the other great 1970s writer who worked at the unstable edge of genre politics.

The test of the success of such destabilizing writers is rarely their personal recognition but often a subtle shifting of values so that their ideas come to seem obvious and normal. The sheer diversity of the modern feminist movement is a testimony to such resistance and contrarian voices, of which Joanna Russ was one. However, while many of Russ's books have remained in print, there are relatively few writers who consciously claim her influence: prescriptive, protagonist-driven fiction (of any genre) is what we subconsciously think fiction is (young writers are told that fic-

tion evolves from conflict and there is a subconscious assumption that there must always be resolution, or "climax").

Reading over the above I realize I have not written an argument that Russ was influential, as much as I have written an argument that she needs to be more influential. I write this while acknowledging that there are many problems with her work. (The transphobia in *The Female Man*, for instance, must come as a shock to many modern feminists.) But Russ was often as angry at herself and her own thinking as she was at the thinking of others; that is what *The Two of Them* is about, her realization that the nice men in her life were still part of the structures against which she was fighting.

We can, however, see a number of writers who write in the same mode, who meet Russ's demand that writing should be angry and provocative, should reject easy solutions and avoid getting caught in other people's expectations, or even the sense that what happens to us, the individual, matters in the larger scale of things: we can look to writers such as Margo Lanagan, Nalo Hopkinson, M. John Harrison, Orhan Pamuk, Lisa Tuttle, C J Cherryh, Kelly Link or, in his own quiet way, Ted Chiang. What these people have in common is their position as stylists in the field. Wittgenstein argues that without ethics there can be no aesthetics, and Joanna Russ, and each of these authors, exemplify this. In order to write in a different mode, one has to write a different way. Russ was part of the first group of science fiction writers to take the lessons of Heinlein and his contemporaries—that you can build a physical world through words—and make words work to build a political world. Russ's influence in this area, along with that of her more politicized contemporaries from the New Wave, may be where her influence is most long-lasting: from the 1970s onwards world building became more than the hard sf game of multiple suns and extended seasons; world building turned into new ways of seeing and constructing the sociological and economic politics of the world, new ways of extrapolating that into cultural diversities and challenges to the gendered status quo. In these contexts Russ reminded feminist writers that we can use language to chisel away the giv-

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ens, to unscrew the takens-for-granted, to lever open ossified ideas.

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Notes

- 1 UK blogger Ian Sales has noted that when he writes about it, men notice; when women write about it, it is shrugged off as complaining.
- 2 Responding, I suspect, to the argument over “gentlemen” opening doors for “ladies.” In my day it was common to point out that such “gentlemen” still expected the “ladies” to clean the damn door.
- 3 A notable exception are the Barrayar stories of Lois McMaster Bujold. This is not the only way in which Bujold is an unexpected heir to Russ. The Barrayar stories are, after all, the tale of an extended revolution in which the patriarchy is steadily undermined on many different fronts.

“In order to write in a different mode, one has to write a different way. Russ was part of the first group of science fiction writers to take the lessons of Heinlein and his contemporaries—that you can build a physical world through words—and make words work to build a political world.”



Farah Mendlesohn is Professor and Head of the Department of English, Communication, Film, and Media at Anglia Ruskin University in the UK. In 2005 she won the Hugo Award for Best Related Book for *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, which she edited with historian Edward James. Her book *Rhetorics of Fantasy* won the British Science Fiction Association award for best non-fiction book in 2009 and was nominated for both the Hugo and World Fantasy Awards. And she edited the Hugo-nominated *On Joanna Russ* (reviewed in this issue).





Feminist Futures Out of Time:

Reading Joanna Russ's *What Are We Fighting For?*

by Alexis Lothian

"Russ is wrestling with many of the same questions I engage in my discussions with fellow academics invested in social justice and radical critique, in my writing, in the conversations I have about feminism, race, class, and disability..."

It was only after Joanna Russ's death that I finally took her last book, *What Are We Fighting For? Sex, Race, Class, and the Future of Feminism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), down from my shelf. A university library copy had been there, unread, for several years; it seemed appropriate to read it, at last, in her memory and honor. I wanted to devour the book in one gulp, then to write a blog that would pour forth a joyful paean to its virtues, and to hers.

The book, however, resisted my plans. It forced me to read slowly and to wrestle every step of the way as my reactions veered between impassioned agreement and equally impassioned frustration and critique. I made notes and marked pages, but I never did blog; I simply couldn't figure out what to say, how to boil things down, how to square the contradictory elements of my response. In writing this piece I'm attempting to do so, knowing already that I will fail. But every commentary on Russ's writings, just like every memorial I have read, suggests that such difficulty—never to be easily digested or simply reduced to a summary, either in person or in prose—was one of her most salient characteristics. Perhaps this late, awkward essay will be the right kind of memorial after all.

What Are We Fighting For? is a historical document: both a document of a history and a snapshot of a particular moment in time (a stretched-out one: from its beginning in 1985, through years whose hardship I've heard about in so many elegiac stories of Russ's life, to eventual publication in 1998). It is perhaps best summarized as a polemical snapshot of feminist theory, focused on the areas most in danger of being forgotten. Its long gestation leaves the historical moment to which it is speaking uncertain in many places. Yet it feels, very often, intensely contemporary. Russ is wrestling with many of the same questions I engage in my discussions with fellow academics invested in social justice and radical critique, in my writing, in the conversations I have about feminism, race, class, and disability, both in online fan-

dom and at WisCon. The contemporaneity catches me unawares and continually diverts my attempts to historicize the book, to contain its ideas in their originating context, as I am academically trained to do. Thinking about what Russ says, I find that I am continually confronting my own experiences, histories, and conflicts.

On Finding Russ and Coming Late

When I first read *The Female Man*, "When It Changed," and Russ's other explicitly political works, I wasn't sure what to do with their anger. The first story of Russ's that I remember loving is "Souls": the tale of a rebellious and spiritual girl who turned out to be something else entirely. I wouldn't recognize the story's intense commentary on gendered emotional labor until much, much later. In the 1990s, when I was in my teens and devouring science fiction, much of Russ's fiction had the same discomfiting flavor to me as the copies of the '80s British feminist magazine *Spare Rib* that my mother kept in our spare bedroom. I would read them and the various feminist works on her bookshelves (Zoe Fairbairns, Alice Walker), and I would wonder why these women kept making the world look like so much more of a sexist place than, as far as I was concerned, it self-evidently was. I had to get older before I could recognize that they were simply representing reality, and older still before I could perceive that reality's lasting presence within my own. I read that famous passage in *The Female Man* where Russ addresses the fate of her book:

Do not complain when at last you become quaint and old-fashioned, when you grow as outworn as the crinolines of a generation ago and are classed with *Spicy Western Stories*, *Elsie Dinsmore*, and *The Son of the Sheik*; do not mutter angrily to yourself when young persons read you to hrooch and hrch and guffaw, wondering what the dickens you

"...the future of feminism she was addressing, was attempting to shape, was already firmly located in the past when the book came out. It makes for strange, dislocating reading..."



were all about. Do not get glum
when you are no longer understood,
little book. Do not curse your fate.
Do not reach up from readers' laps
and punch the readers' noses.

Rejoice, little book!

For on that day, we will be free.

And I thought that the ones who no longer understood might have included me. Did the book's strangeness mean that it had been outgrown by culture, or was I simply a confused latecomer? Yet *Whileaway* was intensely appealing, Janet's sexual ease like nothing I could see widely represented around me, and certain elements of the dystopian world were all too familiar. Clearly we were not, yet, free... But that unfreedom was complicated. When I began studying feminist and queer theory it was partly because I wanted to unravel those complications.

While I was struggling with the status of feminist freedoms and trying to work out what relationship Russ's imagined American '70s bore to the real '90s a continent and an ocean away, Russ was confronting feminist and antifeminist writings of the '80s in order to create *What Are We Fighting For? Sex, Race, Class, and the Future of Feminism*. Her health and the project's growing unmanageability meant that she did not seek to bring it up to date for its late-'90s publication, either by incorporating new writings or by periodizing the old. And so the future of feminism she was addressing, was attempting to shape, was already firmly located in the past when the book came out. It makes for strange, dislocating reading; fiction, even intensely politically engaged fiction, survives losing its point of origin so much better than non-fiction polemic. Translating the implications of an argument across time and space is never simple, and Russ's arguments are complex at the best of times. But despite the anachronism of it—despite the fact that Russ is writing for the feminists who were her college students while I was still in primary school—*What Are We Fighting For?* alternates reminders of its “quaint and old-fashioned” state with moments of immediate relevance that reach up and punch me in the nose. And sometimes those are difficult to tell apart.

The Personal Is Political Is Professional

Russ is fierce in her denunciations of academic feminisms. Since I am an academic feminist—if one in a somewhat liminal space, as I began to write this while in the process of finishing a PhD and seeking permanent employment in a less-than-friendly market¹—it is perhaps unsurprising that I feel called out—interpellated, to use the Althusserian vocabulary I've gained from my studies in critical theory. In this passage:

Some years ago at a Modern Language Association annual convention, I ran into a student of mine who'd been in one of the earliest women's studies classes I had taught. Then a blond, bejeaned, braless free spirit, she had metamorphosed into an upwardly aspiring young academic professional in heels, hose, makeup, success dress, and some very new—or very old—ideas. (18)

I feel that I may be much like the former student Russ goes on to describe herself berating. And, after years both of studying and exploring the construction of gender and of struggling with the apparent meanings of my own femininity in queer and straight, formal and informal, professional and casual contexts, I bristle at the implication that to choose heels and makeup is to capitulate to patriarchy. Even if it is a clothing choice made in order to be taken seriously. (In my own successful academic job-seeking in 2012, I was persuaded that I would be taken more seriously if I chose not to wear a skirt.) I realize that the MLA is a more accepting place now than at the time of Russ's attendance, or even than in 1998—but I do wonder whether an upwardly aspiring, three-piece-suit-wearing, butch academic professional could have received an analogous critique for their “success dress.” Many times in the book, this theme recurs: this connection between gender expression and relationship to gendered, classed power hierarchies that completely erases any significance of pleasure, of self-expression, of aesthetic joy, or even (when it comes to the professional elements) of competency in compromise.

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Cont. on p. 12



Feminist Futures (cont. from p. 11)

"It is passages like these, where Russ casts herself as the last bastion of true feminism in an academy overloaded with patriarchal theory...in which I see, sadly, why the book is not more widely read."

I was grateful for the person who had the book from the library before me, who annotated many sections in pencil with just what I was thinking. What if it's fun to wear makeup? To perform femininity? To fuck men? What if men care about this stuff too? What if it's not so easy to delineate the difference between maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity? Russ argues that feminism had/has (I suspect she'd consider the argument applicable beyond the moment in which it was composed) become something that serves the young professionals at the cost of the women whom it ought to be for: her example is of a working-class student working several jobs and raising a child alone (6). Though I and many of my peers are doing our best to do things otherwise, I think that she may be right. But working-class women often know the complicated powers and labors of feminine gender very well, and my own experience as a teacher leads me to think that dismissing the validity of choices made in the hope of economic advancement might alienate some people in this group most of all.

It is passages like these, where Russ casts herself as the last bastion of true feminism in an academy overloaded with patriarchal theory—those "old ideas" that the former student was holding to—in which I see, sadly, why the book is not more widely read. She reads psychoanalysis, for example, as employing the "basic assumptions" that "'behind' behavior and reports of subjective experience, producing both, lies a metaphysical entity called 'personality,' that this Human core is essentially static, and that it is constructed by very early personal relations and personal relations only," such that the social relations of heterosexuality, patriarchy, and so forth are taken to be part of that universal (22). I've done my wrestling with Freud, and I have felt intensely angry at many of the seeming universalisms of psychoanalytic theory. But psychoanalysis has also been a powerful tool for feminist, queer, and critical race studies scholars working to explain all the ways in which static and metaphysical cores are precisely *not* static, because of the ways in which psychoanalytic theories can suggest possibilities for the convoluted processes by which the social gets into our psyche and is reproduced

by us.² In contrast to the reductive theories of sociobiology that have come to take psychoanalysis's place in popular culture, critical uses of psychoanalytic theory can underline the fact that there is no universal "human" precisely because we are shaped differently by different experiences, structures, and histories—some of which happen before we are born.

See? This is my experience in reading this book. I argue back. I dispute interpretations. I cite. I also clap and cheer—sometimes at the same things that irritate me. In a quotation from Sandra Boyner, for example, Russ points out that academia reproduces itself by "limiting scholarship to experts who had survived extensive training in theory, methods, professional ethics, and the work already completed by others" (71)—might I find my generosity toward psychoanalysis reflected there?

The wider academic world of which I am a part, the world to which Russ's critiques continue to apply, is better at being generous to Freud, Marx, and Foucault than it is to old-fashioned feminisms, whose very imbrication of personal and political can make their insights difficult to separate from their failings. In fact, Russ has already given us the tools to analyze that gendered difference, in *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. An appropriate maxim might perhaps be *she wrote it, but it was too problematic to be worth remembering*. *What Are We Fighting For?* dedicates itself to calling attention to the feminist knowledge that had been forgotten, that has still not been adequately remembered a decade after this book's publication.

I read some of the works to which Russ refers in a graduate class on Marxist theory, taught by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (activist academic, black feminist radical, and founder of the prison abolition organization Critical Resistance). The class was full of intense young radical scholars, all more or less committed to economic, racial, and gender justice. Gilmore assigned the socialist feminists Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Leopoldina Fortunati, who argue that women's unwaged labor reproduces capitalism and that wages for housework would be a disruptive intervention, if not a utopian prospect for change. Their ideas did not go down well. They were read as gender essentialist and as insufficiently at-

"What Are We Fighting For? dedicates itself to calling attention to the feminist knowledge that had been forgotten, that has still not been adequately remembered a decade after this book's publication."



tentive to the racial and colonial politics of domestic labor. And, indeed, so they are. But I will never forget Gilmore's response. She insisted that we must learn to read generously, to respect political projects for what they are as well as what they fail to do, that we understand their influence—and that we must at the same time hold that generosity and respect together with critique so that when we historicize, we do not oversimplify anyone's work to something that we are either for or against. I have tried to take this approach in all my work since, and I recognize it in the way Russ deals with the huge variety of feminist theorists in *What Are We Fighting For?*

What It's Really About

To (generously) place Russ's reaffirmation of feminist knowledge production into its historical moment is to orient her writing in the context of the 1980s and of the backlash, the counterweights exerted on feminism by a political scene dominated by the right and by so-called family values, at the same time that feminist and lesbian communities were arguing over the power dynamics of sex, pornography, and BDSM. This is where the book's untimeliness causes the most trouble. Old arguments lose their edge and their fire; we think we know who won, that the answers and the rights and wrongs are obvious. For Russ, the so-called "porn wars" were odious infighting at a time when feminists and especially lesbians needed to unite across difference, not fixate on its details. But while that was certainly true, those fights looked different by the '90s and afterward. Desire and gender presentation had grown different terms through AIDS-related queer activism and the rise of transgender politics, as well as through the work of feminists of color to remind white feminists that claims to sisterhood had never been without conflicts and fractures.

Many would call these changes the third wave. But I tend to dislike the idea that feminist movements can so easily be demarcated, and work like Russ's slips those boundaries easily. The chapter that she found most difficult to write—the chapter on race—highlights the differences and conflicts that have long existed within so-called second wave feminism, reminding

those who associate intersectional critique only with a younger generation's feminism that it has always been there and always been necessary, even if not effectively acknowledged. The courage it clearly took her to write it is informative for someone like me, who has studied bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa in every feminist theory class I ever took (though I would certainly never think myself immune to racism). While seeing the ways that they could perpetuate racial oppression, Russ demands that we take even the most disrespected, most seemingly outdated parts of feminism's history—lesbian separatism—seriously, that we not relegate it to a wave gone by. I need my practice in generous reading most when Russ describes male to female transsexuals as "men" and criticizes cisgendered women who welcomed them into lesbian spaces, when she gets impatient with young lesbians who had been having too much fun talking to gay men in drag (90). Knowing that Russ was eventually prepared to acknowledge she had been wrong here helps (and helps me imagine a line of defense for that young femme scholar she met at MLA). And when she talks about the "resources" of feminine labor providing unacknowledged support while elevating masculinity, insisting that "no one is unaffected by this society's misogyny" (93), Russ could be diagnosing dynamics that continue to persist within queer communities.³

The argumentative flow of *What Are We Fighting For?* is often an oscillation between bold, provocative critiques and more nuanced explanatory responses. It mirrors my frequently contradictory reactions and demands that we carry ideas to their most radical conclusions while keeping their complexity intact. For example, Russ makes many claims that sound as if she understands heterosexual desire to be purely a symptom of oppression, harkening to the probably-mythical statement by Ti-Grace Atkinson that "feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice." She interprets Janice Radway's dedication to her husband of 1984's *Reading the Romance* as an "inexcusable" signal that "the author's critique of sexist norms is purely academic and that she obeys them in her personal life" (24).

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"The argumentative flow of What Are We Fighting For? is often an oscillation between bold, provocative critiques and more nuanced explanatory responses. It mirrors my frequently contradictory reactions and demands that we carry ideas to their most radical conclusions while keeping their complexity intact."

Cont. on p. 14



Feminist Futures (cont. from p. 13)

"It is Russ's vital and far-reaching feminist analyses of work that will stay with me most from this reading and rereading, that I will remember as an inspiration more than a debate."

"She is a feminist thinker whose legacy we must make last into many more generations."

But later she clarifies this with a social and economic articulation of desire and its meanings, stating that to equate "the desire to squeeze a handsome stranger's buttocks and tiptoe through the tulips with him to a lifetime of hard work and accommodation to male privilege is not logical" (132). We might easily argue that marriage can, if the participants work at it, be more about buttock-squeezing than sexist norms, despite its patriarchal and economic history. But it is the economics that are most central to the argument Russ is making. The institution of heterosexuality as it is manifested in marriage, she suggests, might quite simply be a result of the "objective necessity" of "domestic work" (177). If—as Russ does—we extend the idea of domestic work into all kinds of material and emotional reproductive labor, and if—as Russ does not—we also see marriage as any configuration of couplehood or partnership, there is much to chew on here about intimate inequalities, about the workings of labor and power in what we can too easily dismiss as our "private" lives.

It is Russ's vital and far-reaching feminist analyses of work that will stay with me most from this reading and rereading, that I will remember as an inspiration more than a debate. Russ lays out Marxist theory in a straightforward, elegant few pages (191-202) that I hope to assign to students in the future: what capitalism is, locally within the US and globally, how it devalues human relationships, work, and play by making them all a matter of money, and a fine three-word summation: "*capitalists are thieves*" (198). Being a woman has historically been and still is a job, Russ argues: an underpaid and unappreciated one within capitalism. I mentally added a corollary that what she calls the Woman Job is not a matter of biology and can be done by anyone, and that it can and increasingly does take place outside the home; but the Woman Job remains the best name, because we are talking about feminized labor.⁴ Synthesizing and summarizing socialist feminism, Russ talks about the specificities of women's labor within capitalism: the labor of mothering, the labor of performing appropriate affect to ward off street harassment (251), and the ways in which

intersections of class and race have meant that the feminist perspective on the oppressions of family, marriage, and domestic labor that she has frequently expressed in the book is by and large a white one (270). And she calls attention to the apocalyptic trajectory of monopoly capitalism, reminding us of the venerability of the critiques that have become comparatively mainstream recently, and of their compatibility with feminist intersectionality.

These parts of the book feel fresh, immediate, and necessary—even more as I picked up *What Are We Fighting For?* to write this piece, my head filled with the possibilities sparked by the Occupy movement, than it did when I read it for the first time immediately after Russ's death. In fact, in writing and looking repeatedly and deeply into *What Are We Fighting For?*, I've argued myself away from the awkward antagonisms with which I started. I finish with a deeper and truer feeling of awe, admiration, and respect for Russ than the already significant one I had when I began. She is a feminist thinker whose legacy we must make last into many more generations—and I will be assigning her work in my classes just as soon as I possibly can.

Notes

- 1 Not quite so tenuous as it was; between submission and final revisions, I've been offered and accepted a tenure-track job.
- 2 The texts that led me to think this way include Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Anne Cheng's *The Melancholia of Race* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).
- 3 See for example Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl: A Transgender Woman on the Scapegoating of Femininity* (San Francisco: Seal Press, 2007).
- 4 For an example of transnational, transgendered labor doing the Woman Job, see Tomer Heyman's 2006 film *Paper Dolls*, which tracks the lives of MTF Filipina transgender care workers in Israel, and Martin Manalansan's discussion of it in "Queering the Chain of Care Paradigm" (*Scholar and Feminist Online*, 6.3, 2008).

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Alienation and “the Other” in the Short Fiction of Joanna Russ

by Brit Mandelo

At first glance, Joanna Russ’s body of short fiction appears too varied to discuss as a coherent subject united by a thematic thread—spanning nearly forty years and sixty stories as it does, with almost as many genres involved—but if there is one recurring theme I have observed throughout these diverse stories, it is alienation and the subjectivity of “the Other.” The outsider, alienated from society or their surroundings, is a common figure in Russ’s fiction and appears in multitudinous forms in stories that are otherwise quite different, providing myriad angles on the theme of alienation depending on the story in question and weaving a tapestry of continuous argument throughout her work.

I’d like to discuss four stories in particular with this assertion in mind, stories that illustratively span a gamut of genres and styles while still maintaining a central concern with alienation and the Other: “Useful Phrases for the Tourist” (from *The Zanzibar Cat*), an excerpt from a fake-language guide; “The Mystery of the Young Gentleman” (from *Extra(Ordinary) People*), a gender-queer intrigue-and-adventure story; “Everyday Depressions” (from *Extra(Ordinary) People*), a feminist metafictional narrative written in letters; and Russ’s first published piece of speculative fiction, “Nor Custom Stale” (from *The Hidden Side of the Moon*), a science fictional tale of a wife and husband isolated in a hermetically sealed house until the end of time. These stories considered together and separately present in microcosm the larger universe of Russ’s fiction oeuvre, a universe that rings with a vividly explored and ruthlessly extrapolated thematic concern, resonating down the years and across the spectrum of her writing.

The first of these stories, “Useful Phrases for the Tourist,” is one of the most outright comedic pieces in Russ’s entire body of fiction. While humor is consistently present in Russ’s work, it tends to be of a sharper and darker flavor than that on display in this story. “Useful Phrases” initially appears lighthearted and glib, even dismissible as a serious piece of fiction, despite the perpetual threat of accidental death that hangs over the tourist in question.

“AT THE HOTEL: That is my companion. It is not intended as a tip” (*Zanzibar* 124) or “AT THE THEATER: [...] I did not intend to sit on you. I did not realize you were in this seat” (127), for example, are amusing and faintly ridiculous lines; so too are many of the other phrases the Lochrine guidebook provides the tourist in need of basic communication. To argue that this story has a theme at all may seem strange or overreaching until the reader more thoroughly considers the shape of the text, the phrases included, and the narrative that grows out of these isolated lines of potential dialogue from the guidebook.

The constant threat of accidental death (“This cannot be my room because I cannot breathe ammonia. [...] Are you edible? I am not edible. [...] We humans do not regenerate. [...] Please do not let the atmosphere in [out] as I will be most uncomfortable” [125-26].) is the axis upon which the tourist’s alienation from the Lochrine society rests. The literal nature of the tourist *as alien* in the Lochrine society is what all of the misunderstandings that the guidebook attempts to navigate have in common, be they social or physical. In particular, the recurrence of the phrase “Is this intended to be erotic?” for use at a party and “Is this supposed to be erotic?” (126-27) for use at the theater, often followed by ways to extricate oneself from the sexual situation with the Lochrine that the tourist has found themselves in, implies the position of the tourist as true outsider in the dominant society. Nearly every situational subheading contains a phrase for the request to be taken to the Earth Consulate, with varying levels of urgency or implied danger, no matter how nonthreatening the situation may have initially appeared in the preceding lines. The final, “GENERAL” subheading consists almost entirely of requests to be taken to the Consulate—to be placed back in a familiar social situation where the tourist is not outsider/Other in perpetual danger of being accidentally eaten, mated with, poisoned, or suffocated, to name a few hazards—and ends with the line, “I am dying” (128).

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Alienation (cont. from p. 15)

“Russ may be using alienation for comedic effect, but the arguments about the dangers presented to the Other by dominant society that can be drawn from the text, if the text is taken as a larger metaphor, are not funny.”

This story made of guidebook phrases is a farce comedy, but one entirely driven by the experience of a true Other—not simply cultural, but biological and psychological as well—attempting to navigate a society where they are alien. Survival and communication in a dominant society that does not understand or connect with the alien outsider are the basic concerns of the Locrine guidebook, after all. Russ may be using alienation for comedic effect, but the arguments about the dangers presented to the Other by dominant society that can be drawn from the text, if the text is taken as a larger metaphor, are not funny. Without alienation, “Useful Phrases for the Tourist” wouldn’t be a functional story; it would have no center, and certainly wouldn’t be as hilarious. In an illustrative microcosm of Russ’s short fiction, stories like “Useful Phrases for the Tourist” show that even at her most whimsical, she was still working with the broader ideas that underpin her larger fictional project. While it appears to be the least serious piece in her entire oeuvre—short, silly, and free of emotional heft—even it has an implicit, through-going concern with the functions and patterns of alienation and of being the Other.

Conversely, “The Mystery of the Young Gentleman” is an emotionally and thematically rich story making direct arguments about outsider existence and alienation in a more contemporary social milieu: the late nineteenth century. I have discussed this story as a piece of genderqueer fiction concerned with “passing” and sexual/gender performativity elsewhere (Mandelo, “Reading...”), but implicit in those concerns is the obvious function of alienation—what would passing be without a dominant society the Othered, alienated person has to blend into?

“The Mystery of the Young Gentleman” is told through letters to a third party by a narrator whose gender is constructed as non-binary.¹ It follows that narrator’s attempt to disguise and transport a young woman telepath from Europe by sea to America, where they will make their way to a safe telepathic colony together. The passage is made treacherous by the interest an older male doctor takes in the pair; the narrator must neutralize him to protect their identities, and does so by seducing and then blackmailing him, using varying

gender-performances throughout. With the threat posed by the doctor sufficiently defused, the narrator implies that there is a happy ending ahead when the pair finish the journey.

The reason they are traveling to the colony of other telepaths in the first place, well away from the dominant society in the mountains of the American West, is to escape the danger of persecution and manipulation. To make it there, however, they must both blend into expected social roles and perform accordingly as average, normative persons—though they are anything but. The narrator and the young woman’s lives are both in danger, thanks to their outsider status as telepathic individuals; their performances of normativity, blending in despite their real alienation, are vital. When the mask slips too far in one direction and the bumbling Doctor begins writing up the narrator’s case, “names, dates, details, everything that must never get into print” (*Extra(Ordinary)* 77), believing the narrator to be a male invert, the intrigues begin and the performances become more complicated, manipulating not only the norms of society but the *expected* forms of alienation from them. Of sexuality and gender, the narrator says: “...the division is so strong, so elaborate, so absolute, so much trained into them as habit, that within reasonable limits they see, generally, more or less what they expect to see, especially if one wears the mask of the proper behavior” (73). This sexual division and the accepted/expected manners of Othering in the nineteenth century are what allow the narrator to succeed in neutralizing the Doctor.

“The Mystery of the Young Gentleman” is, therefore, another piece deeply driven by concerns with alienation and outsider subjectivity, though it differs in every other way from a light piece like “Useful Phrases for the Tourist.” “The Mystery of the Young Gentleman” explores alienation from the first-person perspective of the character experiencing it, a person who is actively Othered by their gender, their true sexuality, and their telepathy—genuinely alien, a different strain of humanity entirely—but who must nonetheless pretend *not* to be an outsider, or pretend to be a certain *type* of outsider. The narrator becomes at turns a handsome young cardsharp, a woman dressed as a man, a stereotypically

“The Mystery of the Young Gentleman’ explores alienation from the first-person perspective of the character experiencing it, a person...actively Othered by their gender, their true sexuality, and their telepathy—genuinely alien... —but who must nonetheless pretend not to be an outsider, or pretend to be a certain type of outsider.”



predatory gay man, a father, a rancher, and a mentor, performing all of these roles with finesse, class, and utter conviction for the necessity of passing for ultimate survival. Yet, the reader and the narrator are both perpetually aware of the alienation driving and informing these vital performances, aware that they *are* performances.

The three axes of alienation from the dominant society in this story—sexuality, gender, telepathic ability—are all interwoven and interdependent, as are axes of oppression in theory and real life. The way the narrator understands their gender as opposed to how their young charge and the dominant society understands gender comes out explicitly: “Her head, like all the others’, is full of los hombres y las mujeres as if it were a fact of nature [...] If I say *las hombres y los mujeres*, as I once did and am tempted to do again, she will kick me” (70-71). This is one point of Othering that affects the narrator’s subjectivity and forces them into an outsider position not only in the broader society but also with their charge, who shares their telepathic ability. There is no-one on board the ship to whom the narrator can communicate fully; they are ultimately alienated, hence their letters to the understanding fellow in the town they are heading towards. Without alienation and outsider subjectivity, “Mystery of the Young Gentleman” would not only lack its entire plot—if the telepathy didn’t render the narrator an Other, there would be no danger—it would also have no arguments to make about the ethics of passing and performance. The thematic heft of the story would be nonexistent. Once again, this time in a fantastic historical narrative, alienation and the outsider are paramount.

“Everyday Depressions” is a whole other sort of story from the preceding two: not speculative in the slightest, it is a referential, metafictional, postmodern, semi-autobiographical piece of short work told through letters, about the narrator’s description of a fake lesbian gothic novel she is writing, to her woman friend. The semi-autobiographical literary story is a common occurrence in the larger body of Russ’s short fiction; such stories are always explicitly feminist, set contemporarily, and highly driven by allusion; as such, “Everyday Depressions” is an ideal representation of this sort of story for the theoretical

microcosm I am attempting to construct here, not least because it, too, talks about alienation and outsider subjectivity.

In “Everyday Depressions,” the narrator writes letters to another woman describing a lesbian gothic novel she was inspired to write after seeing a gay gothic in a bookstore; the reader sees only the narrator’s side of the correspondence. The hypothetical novel as she unfolds it is about Mary, whose estate is run by her feckless and manipulative male relatives, and Fanny, the young woman who becomes her companion, as they dance around a courtship with each other while solving the mysteries lurking in Mary’s family. Though she decides not to write the novel after all, outlining it leads her to discuss her own feelings about feminism and lesbian subjectivity in the last letter, ending the story on a meditative note.

Due to its dual-layered story, “Everyday Depressions” has two angles on alienation and outsider subjectivity. The first is the way in which the depicted author describes her characters and their interactions with their world as outsiders, and the second is her own alienation from her world on a university campus and in the wider society. The metafictional nature of the story allows for this twofold approach, where the character as author is aware of the constructions of alienation and lesbian subjectivity in her pretend gothic novel while the actual author, Russ, demonstrates the character’s own alienated subjectivity through the narrative. The romance between Mary and Fanny that unwinds in typical gothic fashion in the letters is driven by dire secrets, family intrigues, and above all the social strictures against women’s love—after all, the guilt on Mary’s part is driven by a relationship she had with a “Miss Bethel, who shunned her (Mary) upon discovering that their feelings for each other were carnal” (*Extra(Ordinary)* 154-55) and then commits suicide over it—that finally resolve in a quiet house away from society and “a walk into the sunset, hand in hand, and the obligatory prophecy that *Some Day Society Will Accept a Love Like Ours...*” (158). Without their outsider status as women, the inheritance of Mary’s estate wouldn’t have been at issue, and without their alienation as lesbians, there wouldn’t have been so much convulsion and drama over their having feelings for each other;

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Alienation

(cont. from p. 17)

"Angles of engagement and forms of exploration can and do differ throughout Russ's short fiction, but the presence of the broader thematic concern has been a part of the project since her first sale."

of all this, the narrator remains wryly aware. Finally, as the letters end with her own reflection on her increasing age and "middle-aged tolerance" (160), she discusses a scene in which her own alienation seems to come full circle as part of the plot that had driven her to want to write a lesbian gothic in the first place, after having seen a gay one on a bookshop shelf: "Last week a frosh wombun (wumyn? wymeen?) came up to me while the other twenty-year-olds were chasing Frisbees on the university grass, playing & sporting with their brand-new adult bodies, and said 'O Teachur, what will save the world?' and I said, 'I don't know'" (160). The ways in which age creates a divide, changes perceptions, and renders her in some forms unable to communicate even with those young folks who are now as she once was herself—the snarky parenthetical reference to made-up feminist words in particular is a spot of division between the narrator, who is writing about *women*, and the young person—those, too, are forms of outsider subjectivity, especially on a university campus populated almost entirely with brand-new adults.

"Everyday Depressions" gives the reader both author and story within a story, at a conversational remove. There are further referential commentaries—such as the potential story heroine's mother, who was named Alice Tiptree and came from the Sheldon family, and "(by the way) died of a broken heart" because of the loss of her romantic friendship with another woman—that complicate the nature of lesbian subjectivity and alienation even further, commenting as they seem to on both the real world and the fictional world the Russ-esque narrator is creating in her letters. Though it is a very short, somewhat comedic and finally mellow open-ended piece of metafiction, "Everyday Depressions" is exploring alienation and outsider subjectivity no less than other stories like "The Mystery of the Young Gentleman" or "Nor Custom Stale;" the difference rests only in the angle of engagement, a difference that illustrates how varied the embodiment of a given theme can be between stories in a larger collection of work.

Angles of engagement and forms of exploration can and do differ throughout Russ's short fiction, but the presence of

the broader thematic concern has been a part of the project since her first sale. "Nor Custom Stale," Russ's first published piece of speculative fiction, is a story that makes its commentary on alienation almost impossibly literal, so immediate that at first glance I slipped past it and read only the commentary on domestic entrapment in the text. In the story, Freda and her husband Harry live in a futuristic House, a self-contained unit that lasts for generations and takes all possible care of its inhabitants. Their House begins having minor malfunctions that concern Freda but which Harry disregards until it is so far gone that they can no longer leave or communicate with the outside world—no car, no phone, no mail, no view out of the windows. They fall into a routine that Harry enjoys as if he's on a perpetual vacation but Freda dislikes, bored and isolated, perpetually ignored and her concerns pushed aside. Time begins to slip. There is one intrusion into their house from someone who is dressed and speaks strangely but it startles them and they refuse to listen to him. Finally, all of the red lights on the House's panel begin to glow—it is failing. It is then they realize that without change in their lives they have not aged and the world is ending; they and the House have nearly outlasted it all, but not quite. Freda's alienation from the outside world, as well as from her husband and her House, are vitally necessary to the story's argument about domestic entrapment and allow it to unfold. Throughout the story, as Freda and her husband grow increasingly isolated—at first they must shut off their car, and then the phone goes, and then the mail stops coming—Freda also becomes increasingly alienated from her own world and their unequal relationship.

At first, when the House begins having problems, Harry continually dismisses Freda's concerns with the phrase "not serious," repeating it at every turn as Freda protests that "something is really wrong" (126). As her communication with the outside world is slowly—and quite symbolically, in the larger arc of the story—cut off, trapping her inside, she comes to realize that regardless of Harry's presence in the House she is quite alone there. Without the phone, or the mail, or friends, or a husband with whom she can communicate,

"Nor Custom Stale," Russ's first published piece of speculative fiction, is a story that makes its commentary on alienation almost impossibly literal..."



Freda's engagement with her mind and her daily life begin to slip. She solves, erases, and redoes the same word puzzles with no memory of the solutions in a particularly upsetting scene. Alienation is stagnation, stasis, and in the end the reader discovers that quite literally, as the House—isolated, alienated, and completely without change inside—has managed to last until the end of the world, “almost [...] forever...as such things go” (137). “Nor Custom Stale” is the beginning of Russ's visible fiction project and demonstrates the centrality of the themes of alienation and “the Other” throughout her work, from the very first piece of science fiction she published. The literal representation of isolation and alienation in the science fictional universe of “Nor Custom Stale” as Freda's world narrows and narrows until it can narrow no further is a dedicatedly feminist argument, rooted in critique of the feminine mystique; but it is also an exploration of the sensations of outsider subjectivity, the sensations of being the Other with no connection to a broader society, and the damage that isolation can do.

Here, I find it important to acknowledge that feminist and queer subjectivities are alienated subjectivities; that is one reason this perennial thematic concern flows through Russ's short fiction, since her fictional worlds tend to revolve around queer and/or feminist centers and characters, but it is also a personal authorial experience that intrinsically informs Russ's constructions of alienation and the Other. As a lesbian feminist, Russ's own subjectivity was that of an outsider artist in a patriarchal, heterosexist-dominant society. Exploring that alienation from all possible angles in her fictional project is both an artistically and a personally significant act. I have observed the thematic concern with alienation at work in Russ's short fiction, but would argue that her novels are no less a part of the larger project: Alyx in *Picnic on Paradise* is both an outsider to the landscape and an outsider to the group of tourists she is trying to save; the protagonist of *We Who Are About to...* is a religious and social outsider who refuses to abandon her subjectivity and her right to die as she chooses; the women of *The Female Man* are outsiders in patriarchal societies, even Janet as she tries to survive in contempo-

rary America; and *The Two of Them* traces Irene's growing awareness of her outsider status and concurrent alienation. I could go on. Definitively, Russ's short works form an integral part of the larger and more readily available bibliography represented by her novels: they are connected.

Engagements with alienation and the Other throughout Russ's short fiction and novels as well as in her nonfiction tie together her immense oeuvre, providing a strong angle from which to discuss her multifarious cultural productions, a powerful unifying concern that runs throughout like a river, on the surface at times and subterranean at others, but always present in some form. The stories in Russ's body of short fiction are heterogeneous, varied, and fabulously unique amongst themselves and in the field at large; however, they may also be read, as I have suggested here via a paradigmatic microcosm of her short work, as a whole united by a broader concern with subjectivity: the complicated, prickly, vital subjectivity of the alien, the outsider, the Other.

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Note

- 1 Though they are implied to be female-bodied, they do not identify as either man or woman; instead, they perform both genders and more throughout the story for purposes of survival and safety.

“As a lesbian feminist, Russ's own subjectivity was that of an outsider artist in a patriarchal, heterosexist-dominant society. Exploring that alienation from all possible angles in her fictional project is both an artistically and a personally significant act.”

Brit Mandelo is a writer, critic, and editor. She is the newest fiction editor at *Strange Horizons*. She has an anthology on genderqueer speculative fiction, *Beyond Binary*, from Lethe Press, as well as the nonfiction book from Aqueduct Press, *We Wuz Pushed: On Joanna Russ and Radical Truth-Telling*.



Contextualizing a Meta-Textual Woman

On Joanna Russ, edited by Farah Mendlesohn, Wesleyan University, 2009, 304 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by Candra K. Gill

"Even for those of us who may not have read the entire breadth of Russ's work, the challenge, variety, and ferocity of her intellect is visible in everything she wrote."

The diversity of Joanna Russ's body of work means it can't be placed into a single box or category; however, some readers may know of her work in only one arena. In many ways, I am such a reader. While I knew about Joanna Russ the critic and Joanna Russ the scholar, I was most familiar with Joanna Russ the science fiction author. Because of this it was a rich experience for me to read *On Joanna Russ*, a critical anthology dedicated to her life and work, and consider the other Russes to be found and embraced.

Even for those of us who may not have read the entire breadth of Russ's work, the challenge, variety, and ferocity of her intellect is visible in everything she wrote. In her introduction to the anthology, editor Farah Mendlesohn writes, "Russ's work questions the cosy consensus of author-reader relations. The reader must follow an author whose every book is written in a different form" (viii). Not only is each book written in a different form, even within a single genre, but this is a person who offered readers significant outputs in academic writing, fiction, reviews, and fanzine exchanges, among other forms. *On Joanna Russ* looks at these many sides of Joanna Russ and locates them within the history of her development as a writer, a feminist, and a scholar.

It is appropriate that a writer whose work Mendlesohn describes as both meta-textual and inter-textual would be considered in essays that place the work into larger cultural contexts. The anthology is divided into two sections: Part I: Criticism and Community and Part II: Fiction. In both sections, all essays consider Russ's work in terms of politics, science fiction history, feminism, and Russ's own personal evolution.

Perhaps because I was most familiar with Russ's fiction when I came to read this anthology, I found the Criticism and Community section to be the most compelling. The essays in this section build upon each other, sometimes even making direct reference to other essays in the book.

Gene Wolfe's opening essay, "Alyx among the Genres," looks at Russ's development as a science fiction writer through the Alyx novel and stories, relating it to Russ's deep knowledge of science fiction and fantasy. Her writing could be critical of the genre and its themes because she knew it so well. Edward James builds upon this with his look at Russ's work as an sf reviewer, which he differentiates from her critical academic work. In his overview, James characterizes Russ's tenure as a reviewer as "a minicourse in how to write science fiction, and—partly in response to letters, critical of her reviewing, which were sent to the editor—in how to write science fiction reviews as well" (20). In "A History of One's Own," Lisa Yaszek contextualizes Russ's work in terms of the establishment of a tradition of feminist science fiction through a discussion of Russ's criticism of mid-Twentieth Century SF by women authors, Russ's own earlier writing, and, coming full circle, later feminist scholars' analyses of Russ's work. Yaszek discusses how Russ's earlier fiction and criticism led to her later focus on feminist utopian futures as a way of critiquing and resisting patriarchy. Helen Merrick's "The Female 'Atlas' of Science Fiction?" looks at Russ as an active participant in science fiction fan communities, particularly through her contributions to fanzine discussions through letters. Merrick's essay was an especially fascinating read for me as a lifelong sf fan who came up after the heyday of print fanzines. Finally, in their "Learning the 'Prophet Business,'" Dianne Newell and Jenea Tallentire look at Russ's professional evolution through her sometimes difficult interactions with Judith Merril.

Each of the essays in this section is interesting on its own, but taken together, they present a complex picture of a writer's own intellectual, political, and artistic development; the evolution of American science fiction, both in terms of professional and fan relationships; and the development of feminist thought, especially within that tradition.

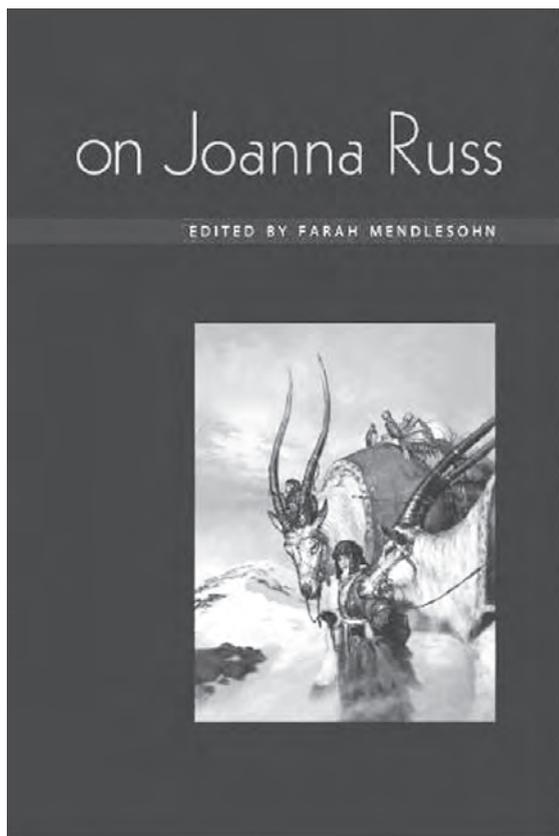


Part II of the anthology deals with Russ's fiction. Some of the essays focus on individual works, while others focus on themes found throughout multiple works. All situate Russ's fiction in larger contexts, whether it's Sherryl Vint's look at Third Wave feminist intergenerational readings, or Samuel R. Delany's look at race and Russ's work in terms of D.W. Griffith's films, or Sandra Lindow's discussion of gender modeling. These essays, which deserve more consideration than I have space to give them here, continue the work

of the first section by looking at Russ's work as part of a larger discussion.

On Joanna Russ was published in 2009, but I read it in 2011, after Russ's death. I've been thinking a lot about Russ and her influence on many of my communities, especially in terms of being a science fiction fan and a feminist. Reading Russ's own work is, of course, the best way to get to know it better. But *On Joanna Russ* is worth the time as well, especially for those like me who are interested in learning more about her and the influences that shaped her work.

"[T]he essays...present a complex picture of a writer's own intellectual, political, and artistic development; the evolution of American science fiction, both in terms of professional and fan relationships; and the development of feminist thought, especially within that tradition."



Candra K. Gill is an interaction designer who lives in the American Midwest. A lifelong sf fan, she currently serves on the Carl Brandon Society steering Committee.



⚙ An Exemplary Inheritance Expanded and Continued
Heiresses of Russ 2011: The Year's Best Lesbian Speculative Fiction, edited by
JoSelle Vanderhooft and Steve Berman, Lethe Press, 2011, 286 pages, \$18.00

Reviewed by Cynthia Ward

"The anthology opens strongly with Ms. Vanderhooft's insightful 'Introduction' and new writer Georgina Bruce's slipstream-y 'Ghost of a Horse Under a Chandelier.'"

"Many of the stories in *Heiresses of Russ 2011* slide more toward the slipstream than Joanna Russ did, and few achieve the heights of her best fiction. But every contribution fulfills Russ's legacy through its intelligence, insight, and fine prose."

The preeminent writer of lesbian speculative fiction is the late Joanna Russ. So it's suitable that a new anthology series collecting the year's best lesbian speculative fiction is titled *Heiresses of Russ*. But readers may reasonably ask if the inaugural (2011) volume, which collects twelve stories and is edited by JoSelle Vanderhooft and Steve Berman, lives up to its ambitious title.

The anthology opens strongly with Ms. Vanderhooft's insightful "Introduction" and new writer Georgina Bruce's slipstream-y "Ghost of a Horse Under a Chandelier." Unfolding in the borderland between mainstream and speculative fiction, this smart story of comics-reading friends working out their ambiguous adolescent relationship is all the more effective for its genre-blurring.

Set in New Orleans's historically significant red-light district, "Storyville 1910" revisits the ex-slave vampire protagonist of Jewelle Gomez's best-known book, the ground-breaking Lambda Award winner *The Gilda Stories* (Firebrand Books, 1991). Most easily appreciated by readers familiar with the novel, "Storyville 1910" is nonetheless clear and engaging enough for newcomers, as Gilda encounters an old friend and a new foe.

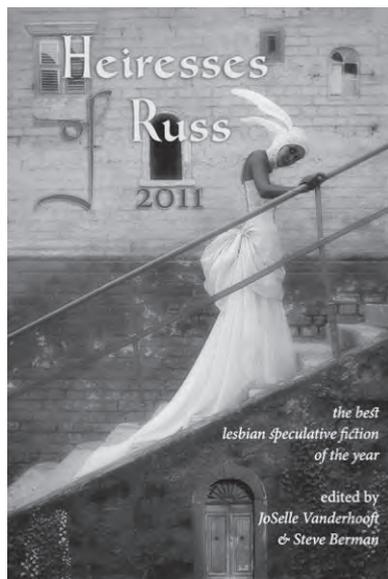
N.K. Jemisin's delightful novelette, "The Effluent Engine," re-imagines the Haitian Revolution with the inclusion of a bastard lesbian spy daughter for Toussaint L'Ouverture and a multicultural steampunk spin. While it's doubtful the protagonist would ultimately be happy if she heeded her beloved's concluding demand, the reader is left eager to revisit this alternate history.

In "The Children of Cadmus," Ellen Kushner wonderfully transforms the myth of Actaeon via the viewpoint of a beloved sister besotted with Artemis. Meanwhile, donning the persona of Jewish lesbian author Esther Garber, Tanith Lee pursues a possible ghost in the darkly droll "Black Eyed Susan."

Though several contributions come from less well-known authors, they too are superior stories. Michelle Labbé's passionate vignette, "Her Heart Would Surely Break in Two," seems as much historical fiction as fantasy. Steve Berman's radical revision of *Swan Lake*, "Thimble-riggery and Fledglings," brings with it heartbreak and liberation. A couple disintegrates in Csilla Kleinheincz's unease-inducing "Rabbits." Zen Cho's lovely Southeast Asian magic-realist tale, "The Guest," features a small magician who takes in a cat that isn't what it seems. A quite different feline features in "The Egyptian Cat," Catherine Lundoff's Lovecraftian amusement. In Nora Olsen's hopeful "World War III Doesn't Last Long," even nuclear catastrophe cannot daunt a determined lover. And relative newcomer Rachel Swirsky contributes the anthology's best work: the audacious Nebula Award-winning novella, "The Lady Who Plucked Red Flowers Beneath the Queen's Window," which follows a dead sorceress's spirit across millennia.

Many of the stories in *Heiresses of Russ 2011* slide more toward the slipstream than Joanna Russ did, and few achieve the heights of her best fiction. But every contribution fulfills Russ's legacy through its intelligence, insight, and fine prose. The anthology, like Russ, deserves a place in your library.

Cynthia Ward has published stories in Asimov's, *Triangulation: Last Contact*, and other anthologies and magazines. With Nisi Shawl, she coauthored *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* (Aqueduct Press) based on their diversity writing workshop, "Writing the Other: Bridging Cultural Differences for Successful Fiction." Cynthia is completing a novel. She lives in Los Angeles.



Monte Rogers

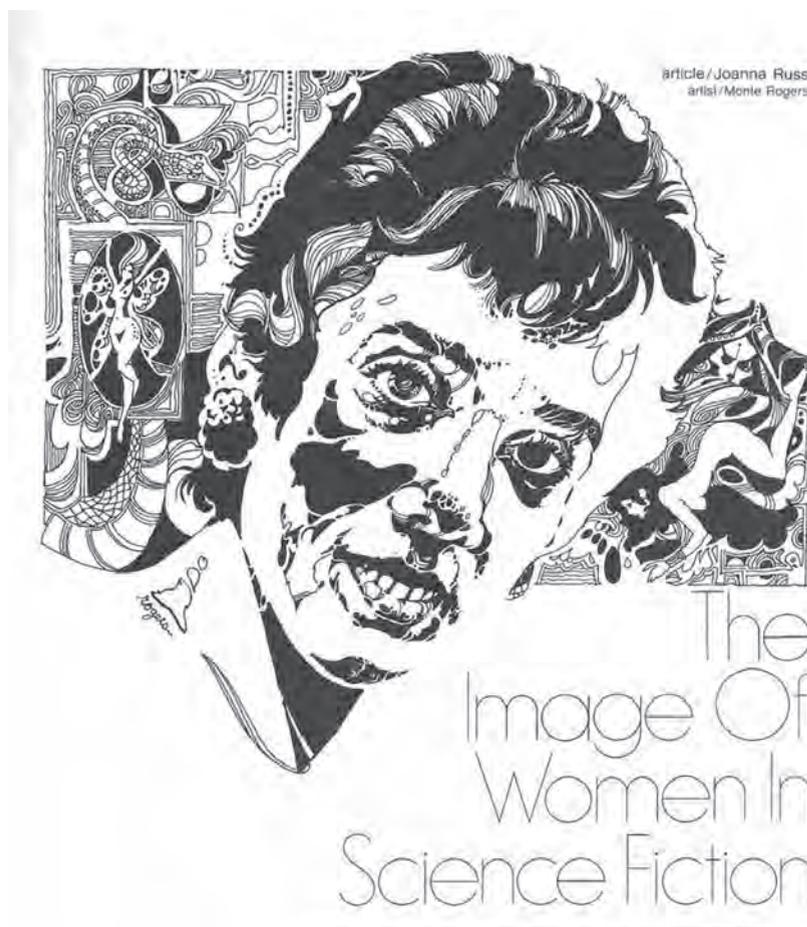
Monte Rogers grew up in Oregon's Hood River Valley and California's central coast. He graduated from the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. For 30 years he worked as a commercial freelance illustrator of books, magazines, and advertisements. He also taught figure drawing and picture making at the California Art Institute. In the early 1970s he provided illustrations for a number of science fiction articles and stories.

In time as he began to show and sell his oil paintings, his illustration work gave way to full time painting. Regarded as a

Western artist, Monte's cumulative works show the influence of his childhood on the West Coast. His subjects include rodeos, amusement parks, beaches, and working men, light-filled images rendered in full-intensity paint infused with a plein air approach. He currently resides in North Bend, Oregon

Monte Rogers' drawing of Joanna Russ reprinted here was first published in the February 1974 issue of *Vertex: The Magazine of Science Fiction*. *Vertex* began publication in February 1973, put out 16 issues, and ceased publication in 1975.

Featured Artist



article/Joanna Russ
artist/Monte Rogers

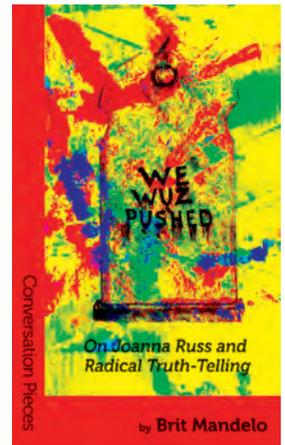
The Image Of Women In Science Fiction

*Just as woman has demanded equality in life,
the fictional woman in science fiction is
ready to become a full character, rather than
a backgrounded sex or search object.*



We Wuz Pushed: On Joanna Russ and Radical Truth-Telling by Brit Mandelo

“To speak radical truths—unapologetically, ferociously, rudely when necessary—is the central purpose of Joanna Russ’s influential body of work,” declares Brit Mandelo in her essay on Russ’s radical, groundbreaking literary and critical work. Mandelo’s essay traces Russ’s evolving efforts to speak truth throughout her literary career—examining both Russ’s successes and failures in doing so. She insists that Russ problematized and individualized her ultimate understanding of truth without rejecting its possibility. Rather, Mandelo argues, the trajectory of change in Russ’s work and her revision of prior truths itself constitutes a valuable part of the truth-telling project. Russ emerges in Mandelo’s essay as a heroic though all-too-human intellectual and artist, one whose angry, brilliant work we cannot afford to ignore or forget.



Birds and Birthdays by Christopher Barzak

Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning: three of the most interesting painters to flourish in male-dominated Surrealism. This is Christopher Barzak’s tribute to them: three stories and an essay that enter into a humane surrealism that turns away from the unconscious and toward magic.

Sometimes the stories themselves seem to be paintings. Sometimes painter and writer may be characters, regarding each other through a painful otherness, talking in shared secrets. Barzak’s stories are huge with the spacious strangeness of worlds where there is always more room for a woman to escape her tormenters, or outgrow an older self.

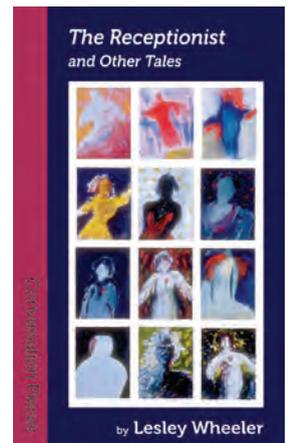
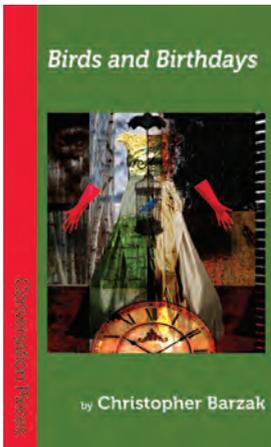
The Receptionist by Lesley Wheeler

A stirring narrative of fantasy and derring-do, set in the ivy-clad towers and poky offices of modern academia, in which the warrior princess of an ancient line returns to the fray at last and summons ancient powers to defend the right... The forces of evil are all too recognizable, the bad guys satisfyingly bad and the good guys not too goody-goody... In the bonus package of shorter poems, “Zombie Thanksgiving” (T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” retold) is stunning, an absolute tour de force.

—Gwyneth Jones

Where can an evil Dean meet his doom more fitly than in terza rima? Lesley Wheeler’s brief novel of misbehavior in academia, subtle and funny, rashly inventive and perfectly realistic, uses all the forgotten powers of metaphor and poetry to make the mundane luminous.

—Ursula K. Le Guin



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