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### Oy Science Fiction: On Genre, Criticism, and Alien Love: An Interview with Marleen S. Barr

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# Oy Science Fiction: On Genre, Criticism, and Alien Love: An Interview with Marleen S. Barr / C. Jason Smith and Ximena Gallardo C.

## Introduction

Marleen S. Barr is a pioneer of feminist science fiction criticism and a leader in the fight against the ghettoizing influences of genre-labeling in literary criticism. While the noteworthy *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction* (University of Iowa Press, 1992) has been praised as Barr's seminal work in feminist science fiction criticism and theory, it is in *Genre Fission: A New Discourse Practice for Cultural Studies* (U of Iowa P, 2000) where she takes on literary critics' discriminatory practices against "genre fiction" in general and fantasy and science fiction in particular.

Currently teaching at Fordham University in New York City, Barr has mentored a whole new generation of feminism and science fiction scholars through such editorial endeavors as the collection *Future Females, The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), *Envisioning the Future: Science Fiction and the Next Millennium* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003), and, of course, her triumphal co-editing (with the redoubtable Carl Freedman) of the Science Fiction special issue of *PMLA* entitled *Science Fiction and Literary Studies: The Next Millennium* (11.3 [May 2004]). Being a woman who always follows her opinions with action, Barr also has published a genre-bending novel, *Oy Pioneer!* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), which joyfully erases the boundary between the fantastic and the real in its search for truth.

Marleen S. Barr is a most outspoken scholar on the ability of SF to foster real change in society, and in her struggle against "textism," she does not pull her punches. Her introduction to the first Science Fiction special issue of *PMLA*, entitled, "Textism—An Emancipation Proclamation," exemplifies her fervent honesty:

I am going to stick my neck out and just say it: Sven Birkert's now infamous review of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a discriminatory diatribe symptomatic of a pathological, knee-jerk science fiction aversion that automatically denigrates all examples of the genre. Birkert's utterances are fighting words, exemplifying what Neil Easterbrook calls the "antipathy for sf" that provokes "genre wars." Genre wars are revolutionary wars in which liberty, equality, and fraternity (and sisterhood) confront spurious elitism in determining literary value. (429)

Barr's understanding of Westfall and Slusser's definition of "textism" (from *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy*, Westport: Greenwood, 2002) as a "discriminatory evaluation system in which all literature relegated to a so-called subliterary genre, regardless of

its individual merits, is automatically defined as inferior, separate, and unequal" (429-30) harkens back to the "separate but equal" arguments of pre-Brown vs. Board of Education racism. Separate is never equal, and separation is itself a political act of power production fueled by fear. As she notes in *PMLA* (and, remember, this is the journal that the very literary critics Barr names read), "To be a literary critic who is afraid of starships (not to mention phasers, warp drives, photon torpedoes, and other starship accoutrements) is to be a literary critic who is antifiction. An antifiction literary critic is as absurd as a Jewish pope" (432). Write on!

But hers is not the righteous indignation of a Gayatri Spivak; no, Marleen S. Barr has the knowing Socratic glint within her eyes that lets you know that *she* knows that the world could be a better place if we'd all just admit our role in keeping it the way it is.

It was on a beautiful bright day in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida that we first spoke with Barr about her new novel, her current critical work, talking horses, alien husbands, and plastic-covered furniture. That conversation conducted during the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts Conference serves as the basis for this interview.

\* \* \*

**Gallardo and Smith:** Your new novel *Oy Pioneer!* seems to be, in some respects, a feminist response to David Lodge's *Small World*. Was that a conscious choice?

**Barr:** There are many academic novel authors I love. Certainly Lodge is among them—as well as Carolyn Heilbrun. It occurred to me that what Heilbrun did with mysteries I could do with science fiction. She imagined feminist professor Kate Fansler. I had something to say about the academic world, about what it was like (what it *is* like) to be a woman in the academic world. You never really hear the women's voices in Lodge. They never seem to have much to say when there is so much they could say. I wanted to turn myself into a protagonist: Jewish Sondra Lear. Sondra is me without the constraints of reality, much like the scenarios Thurber imagined in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," though more real because much of what happens in my novel did happen to me. Lodge was right to a certain extent: many men go to academic conferences to meet women, but the voices of the women at those academic conferences have been silenced. I was told again and again that I had to go to conferences to enhance my career. I saw nothing wrong with spicing up career advancement with a quest to find adventure and love; I'm good at multi-tasking.

**Gallardo and Smith:** Who are those conference women that Lodge writes about?

Who are the women men "slept with" at those academic conferences? *C'est moi*. (Excuse my French. This must be the influence of my French Canadian husband shining through. I must be one of the only nice Jewish girls from Queens in the world who has a French Canadian husband. But that's another story—which just so happens to be the subject of my second novel.) I

wanted to write the truth of what it was like to be a "Lodge novel woman" (thank god I write academic novels instead of spy novels; even in my wildest imagination I would never make it as a "Bond girl." Bond girls do not write feminist theory. And they're not Jewish.) But my experience wasn't at all analogous to one night stand conference sex. Some of my best friends are male science fiction critics. There weren't many women writing SF criticism then at all. I was one of the few women in science fiction studies. The male science fiction critics came to my rescue when big mean conservatives who hate science fiction (replete with large fangs and sharp claws—and I am not kidding) tried to do me in. The male science fiction scholars supported me. After all, they knew what it was like to be marginalized because of their serious interest in so-called "genre fiction"—a.k.a "crap" in big, mean conservatives' parlance. My whole conference milieu experience was much deeper and more personally important than just plain sex. *Oy Pioneer!* is partly about women's complicated experiences at academic conferences—and the complicated academic life they bring with them to those conferences.

I was (and I still am) a feminist science fiction critic, a specialist on separatist feminist lesbian planet literature. It's ironic that in my experience Germans were more open to a Jewish woman specialist on separatist feminist lesbian planets than American Southerners. I ran into more anti-Semitism at my former university located in the American South than I did while teaching in Germany and Austria. Of course, I encountered sexism in Germany—and I make my close encounters with Germany sexism very clear in the novel; but in the south, on the campus I call "Blackhole University," sexism of the "Blackholean" variety made German sexism pale in comparison. And when I taught in Germany there were only two women full professors of American Studies in the entire country. I am sure that the German male professors thought that the existence of two women full professors was enough. But my point is that the discrimination and overt nastiness that ensued at Blackhole University was beyond anything you might imagine.

**Gallardo and Smith:** Some of the things that happen in *Oy Pioneer!* are pretty far-out.

**Barr:** [Grins.] Oh yes. But what happens in the novel is very much how I saw things, or you might say that the exaggeration of fact is just what is necessary to convey the truth of how I felt.

**Gallardo and Smith:** Would you be offended if someone called your writing "magical realism?"

**Barr:** Not at all. Carl Freedman, in his blurb for *Oy Pioneer!*, says that I write "metropolitan magical realism." But I see myself writing in the Jewish humor tradition. There really hasn't been a feminist to follow Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner. I see myself as a baby boomer who expands their tradition to include a feminist perspective. That's the "schtick" voice I speak in and it comes naturally. Just as my novel explains, I really did live with my parents in a condom; a condominium wrapped in protective furniture plastic, that is. My mother really did spray my computer with Lysol because she was afraid of catching computer viruses. Jewish humor is

me. Jewish humor, *c'est moi*. Now that is something my husband would never say. Even though he speaks perfect English, sometimes Jewish New Yawk is beyond his understanding.

**Gallardo and Smith:** So, how closely does *Oy Pioneer!* mirror your real life and the people you know?

**Barr:** [Laughs] Very closely. But let me answer your question in terms of a completely different professional experience. Norman N. Holland was my dissertation director and he appears in my novel under his own name. He taught me to write in my own voice, in my own way, the way other people could not or would not write when formulating scholarly discourse. Some of the people attending this very conference appear in *Oy Pioneer!* There goes one now. Maybe you'll find yourselves in my second novel. Stay tuned.

**Gallardo and Smith:** We've heard that there were some strong reactions to the reality-basis of your novel.

**Barr:** There has been a lot of reaction to the novel. A few people, men, got really angry at me. I don't care. I told the Truth. Whose life is it anyway: it's *my* biography. I described my experiences from an honest, authentic, and feminist point of view. Truth, though, is not sans consequence. [Pause.] You know, I could have gotten pregnant at a science fiction conference. The world's greatest potential science fiction critic could presently be a teenager. Let me carry this nonexistent scenario further: if I did get pregnant, the decision to have the child or not would be my decision. And, in this vein, the decision to write about my life or not is my decision, my right. When men agreed (in terms of their own free will and own accord) to have sex with me, they simultaneously agreed to become a part of my biography. They became part of my history, part of my life. My story is mine to tell. You know, I slept with men at conferences because I really liked them, not to advance my career. I got married when I was in my middle forties. I had no desire to be someone out of central casting for the current hit movie *The Forty Year Old Virgin*. It was lonely at Blackhole State surrounded by those big mean conservative men with large fangs and sharp claws. I mean, Sondra Lear would not sleep with her Blackholeian colleague Jed Bob Zwiffel even if he were the last man on Earth; and don't forget that Sondra loves science fiction scenarios. Sondra wouldn't sleep with Jed Bob even if he had his fangs capped and his claws clipped.

**Gallardo and Smith:** This blurring of the line between fiction and personal history—does this come from your studies of science fiction?

**Barr:** No. It comes from my Norman N. Holland training. I learned reader response criticism as a graduate student at the State University of New York at Buffalo English Department's Center for the Psychological Study of the Arts. Reader response approaches permeate my fiction and scholarly writing. I vehemently believe in the approach that says that people read in terms of their own characteristic style, what Norm calls an "identity theme." Not everyone likes this approach. Some people find fault with me when I write scholarly articles in reader response mode. *C'est la vie*. My fiction has impacted upon my scholarly writing in that my scholarly voice

is now more personal than ever before. I think that writing as I do—putting a feminist Jewish giant talking squid from Mars in the pages of *PMLA*, for example (and I really did do this replete with a reference to the squid's work in my article's works cited list)—could assuage the current literary studies professional crisis in which some scholarly presses are no longer publishing literary criticism. The reason: it is so boring no one will buy it. Norm says that no one else can write scholarly prose in the way that I do. This could be for the best. Maybe one feminist Jewish giant talking squid from Mars appearing in *PMLA* is enough. I am on the verge of further blurring the lines between fiction, personal history, and scholarly writing. I might call this discourse mode, taking my cue from reality television, reality reader response criticism.

**Gallardo and Smith:** Do you own a pair of red feminist clogs like your protagonist, Sondra?

**Barr:** [Laughs] I don't like clothing that inhibits women. I use a backpack and I never wear high heels. I wore clogs for years. The real world version of the character named Thurston Howell used to complain that he stubbed his toes on the "clog traps" I set on hotel room floors. I used to imagine that I would wear white clogs to my wedding. I didn't. I didn't wear white anything when I got married in the Municipal Building[in Queens, New York City]. I never did own red clogs. I do wish that I could have Sondra's magic red feminist clogs. [Barr looks down at her feet and taps her shoes (which are not clogs) together]. Oh, well. I'm not Sondra. If I were Sondra, a smoke surrounded vampire would appear after I tapped my clogs together. As you can see, such is not the case. Just as well. Even though my husband is open minded, I don't think he would like it if I could conjure a smoke surrounded vampire at will. He would say that there is no room for a vampire in our small Manhattan apartment.

**Gallardo and Smith:** Have you changed much since the events in your novel?

**Barr:** I have, thankfully, not mellowed with age. I remain insufferable, irreverent, infuriating—and willing to transgress the patriarchal rules regarding proper, feminine, "good" behavior. I am still railing against those who would thwart feminist fabulation's power to act as the literature of replenishment, those who continue to tell exhausted patriarchal stories that are based upon erasing women's voice, presence, and achievements. Oh, and there is the fact that I no longer travel the world attending academic conferences in search of adventure and romance. I like to bring my husband with me wherever I go.

**Gallardo and Smith:** Where do you see your place in relation to your term "feminist fabulation?"

**Barr:** I hope that people will continue to build upon my work. I was happy to contribute an article called "Feminist Fabulation" to the recently published *A Companion to Science Fiction* edited by David Seed. In my *Feminist Fabulation*, I defined feminist fabulation as fiction about patriarchal fiction. *Oy Pioneer!* is feminist fabulation. Believe me; feminist fabulation is something I know from—but I didn't exactly say it that way in *Feminist Fabulation*. Unlike *Oy Pioneer!*, *Feminist Fabulation*

is not feminist fabulation. This is getting to sound like my book *Genre Fission*.

**Gallardo and Smith:** How would you describe the present state of women as critics of science fiction? What is their future?

**Barr:** There are a lot of wonderful young feminist science fiction critics. I enjoyed working with them when I edited *Future Females, The Next Generation*. When I was a young assistant professor I faced a great deal of difficulty due to the discriminatory attitudes toward feminist criticism in general and the science fiction is "crap" mentality in particular. Now that I am a senior feminist science fiction critic (a category which, of course, did not exist when I started out), I like to try to help the next generation. I recently had the pleasure of serving as the outside reader for two young women's excellent scholarly books on feminist science fiction. The future aside, I want to direct my energy toward helping to make sure that the new feminist science fiction critics' present does not resemble my past at Blackhole University.

**Gallardo and Smith:** So what do you have planned for the future?

**Barr:** After twenty-five years (but who is counting?) of being a husband-hunting feminist science fiction critic, I am so glad that the hunt is finally over. Searching for a husband takes up a *lot* of time. I hope that in my future I never ever again have to go to a conference and think about whether or not the male conferees are married. I hope that I turn my future into a third novel.

**Gallardo and Smith:** Any parting words?

**Barr:** I would never say bye y'all. I prefer: *au revoir*. Why? I have already explained why: I'm a feminist science fiction critic who is married to an alien. That's the truth. Really.



Marleen and Maurice at the 2005 International Conference for the Fantastic  
in the Arts

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