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Here We Come to Save Tomorrow: A Conversation with Dr. Marleen S. Barr



Critical Reading is a Heroic Act . . . **MARLEEN**

S. BARR is known for her pioneering work in feminist science fiction and teaches at the City University of New York. She has won the Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science fiction criticism. Barr is the author of *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*, *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction and Genre Fission: A New Discourse Practice for Cultural Studies*. Barr has edited many anthologies and co-edited the special science fiction issue of PMLA.

1. When did you first fall in love with [science fiction](#)? Was there a specific work and if so, what was it?

Since you are asking me about “first” love, I have to buckle up in the way back machine. When I was a child in the ‘50’s, I was obsessed with a Saturday morning television cartoon called MIGHTY MOUSE. Mighty Mouse was a superhero mouse who flew around in a cape and triumphed over cats. Although I really do not know why, I was absolutely in love with him. My favorite toy was a Mighty Mouse doll. I also watched the original SUPERMAN television show. Two novels mesmerized me: THE WONDERFUL FLIGHT TO THE MUSHROOM PLANET by Eleanor Cameron (1954) and A WRINKLE IN TIME by Madeleine L’Engle (1962). I still remember being a little kid who fell in love with the great illustrations of big extraterrestrial mushrooms in Cameron’s children’s science fiction novel.

2. When did you first fall in love with Butler's fiction? Was there a specific work? If so, what was it, and does it remain your favorite to this day? Why or why not?

I was blown away by *KINDRED* when I was a young Assistant Professor and fledgling science fiction scholar during the early 80's. Yes, *KINDRED* is still my favorite Butler novel. Butler's portrayal of a young woman who can time travel to a plantation and meet her enslaved (and slave *owning*) ancestors is startling. The premise at once calls for understanding the horrific past and its impact upon the present. I am drawn to engaging with past atrocity in order to arrive at clarity of vision in relation to the atrocity. For example, in 1983, I embarked alone upon a Fulbright to Germany. I went to Dachau almost immediately after arriving. When it started to rain, I took shelter in a small brick building which contained an oven. (It was never used; Dachau was not an extermination camp.) I was wet and cold and standing in the doorway of the building. I watched people's expressions as they first saw the oven. I think this is my real-life version of Butler's protagonist Dana seeing the Maryland plantation depicted in *Kindred*.

3. When did you first realize that science fiction featured some problematic representations of women and womanhood? Though this problem clearly plagues all literature, across all of the genre lines, is there any more or particular danger in propagating misogynist (or for that matter, racist) ideologies within the pages of science fiction as opposed to doing so within any other type of literature?

My undergraduate years ensued during the early 70's and coincided with the advent of Women's Studies courses. My experience in Women's Studies 101 made it patently clear to me that the problematic representations of women appeared in women's realistic literature, not in science fiction. More specifically, when I was a freshman, my feminist professor assigned Kate Chopin's *The AWAKENING* and Sylvia Plath's *THE BELL JAR*. I was repelled by the fact that the female protagonists in these novels ended up dead. I very purposefully turned to feminist science fiction to escape from realistic feminist literature's dead women. I lauded feminist science fiction as an escape hatch [—a type of] power fantasy. I was never concerned with misogynist and racist science fiction because I was too busy trying to identify and read feminist science fiction.

4. You're an expert and a pioneer in your field, helping to break the ground on feminist and Africanist readings of science fiction. Please tell us what it means to provide a feminist or Africanist reading of literature, what that means to you, and how that definition may have changed (or stayed the same) for you throughout your career.

Being a feminist or an Africanist reader should include everyone regardless of gender or race. This reading practice to my mind entails respecting literature written by women and blacks and calling attention to it with an eye toward improving the world. My early years as a professional scholar coincided with the inception of feminist theory. Due to my lifelong love for science fiction, it was natural for me immediately to turn to feminist science fiction's cognitive estrangement (Darko Suvin's term) from patriarchy. After spending years writing about feminist science fiction and arguing for its validity, I woke up one day and saw that there was an enormous change at the last minute: the preponderance of the science fiction community did respect women writers. But around 2000 or so I noticed that the state of Africanist science fiction was the same as feminist science fiction "back in the day" when it first interested me. Africanist science fiction was about to burgeon and it needed scholarly attention. But most Africanist scholars did not know about science fiction and most science fiction scholars did not know about Africanist literature. As a feminist scholar, I was familiar with Africanist literature. So, I jumped in to fill the void; I edited AFRO-FUTURE FEMALES. I perhaps acted in terms of the MIGHTY MOUSE theme song: "Here I come to save the day. That means that Mighty Mouse is on the way." I am trying to say that first feminist science fiction needed a scholar and, years later, Africanist science fiction needed a scholar. I wanted to save the day and be on the way to filling this need.

5. In the Afterword of AFRO-FUTURE FEMALES (2008) You write that [Octavia E.] Butler is a descendant of Mark Twain (AFF, 247). Mark Twain's writing consciously wields satire to critique society and, by extension, the readers who make up that society. Do you see Butler as using any one particular tool to analyze social flaws and question reader's innate biases in the same way? What can science fiction as a whole, and Butler's writing in particular, teach us about the lives we lead outside of academia?

Both A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT and KINDRED are science fiction time travel novels. I coined the term "textism" to explain that bias against texts functions like racism and sexism. Textism entails denial. This denial in terms of science fiction functions by defining science fiction as sub-literary and denying that great literature is science fiction. CONNECTICUT YANKEE is not commonly described as science fiction; but it definitely is. Ditto for THE TEMPEST; magic is not [scientific] fact. Great writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and Margaret Atwood have severed their connections to science fiction. Textist responses to science fiction sever connections. That is why I wanted to connect Butler to Twain. CONNECTICUT YANKEE counters Europe's condescending attitude toward American culture by placing an American in medieval England and enabling him to Americanize the English community. KINDRED counters hegemonic patriarchy's condescending attitude toward black women by placing a contemporary black woman within a plantation and enabling her to describe her experience in terms of her eyewitness subjectivity. Hence, Twain and Butler both use time travel to counter innate cultural biases—and defining both of these novels as

science fiction counters textism. Butler's science fiction in particular teaches us that blacks are not aliens in relation to America.

I have to answer the "science fiction as a whole" part personally. When I was a freshman sitting in Women's Studies 101, the world was just realizing that women have orgasms. Popular magazines contained articles with titles such as "Why Women Should Demand To Have Five Million Multiple Orgasms Immediately If Not Sooner." (You asked for "outside academia"; orgasms are located in a galaxy far, far away from academia!) I read these articles and became very anxious. I said O.M.G.—or some early 70's version of the term—okay I am seventeen and I am being told that women have orgasms. But what if I were ninety and I had to live my entire life without this information? I worried about information I needed to know and didn't know. I turned to feminist science fiction's cognitive estrangement from patriarchy to provide answers. I saw positive blueprints for living future female lives. I learned that a husband is not a super hero who swoops into your life while announcing "here I come to save the day." I was so in love with feminist science fiction that I did not get married until I was forty-six. I married an alien—for true. But that is another story (told in my novel OY FEMINIST PLANETS: A FAKE MEMOIR which comes out in July).

6. Part of the reason we do what we do, as academics and as lovers of literature, is in the hope of spreading that love for learning, analysis, and imagination to the next generation. What work (or works) of science fiction would you recommend to young people just beginning their love affair with fiction?

I suggest the daughters of Octavia E. Butler: K. Tempest Bradford, Tananarive Due, Jewelle Gomez, Andrea Hairston, Nalo Hopkinson, N.K. Jemisen, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Nnedi Okorafor, Nisi Shawl, and Sheree Renee Thomas. With a shout out to the fact that Samuel R. Delany is this year's Science Fiction Grandmaster, young people just beginning your love affair with fiction here I come to save the day with this news: O.M.G., these writers are awesome!!

Inspired by Dr. Barr's experience with Octavia? Read more about her research at: http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/barr_marleen_s and https://ohiostatepress.org/index.htm?books/book_pages/barr_afro-future.html. Be sure to check out her article "Oy/Octavia: Or Keeping My Promise to Ms. Butler" published in CALLALOO, 32(Fall 2009). Interested in sharing your thoughts on science fiction in general and Octavia in particular? Come be a part of the conversation! Contact oebliterarysociety@gmail.com to volunteer an interview for posting on our website!