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CUNY Borough of Manhattan Community College

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An Interview with Feminist Science Fiction Scholar Dr. Marleen S. Barr

By J.F. Garrard

Dark Helix Press first met Dr. Marleen S. Barr when we opened ourselves up to submissions for our *Trump: Utopia or Dystopia* book. Marleen's story "The Trump Brand" describes a world dominated by goods produced by a certain president's family and even the moon is made available for advertisements! Her keen sense of humor and knowledge of writing led us to interview her about feminism in science fiction, Trump as a muse and inspiring words for future writers.

JF Garrard (JFG): Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Dr. Marleen S. Barr (MSB): This is not an easy question. Maybe I have been a scholar for too long because I am tempted to do research to provide an answer. I feel as if I should look myself up in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* in order to know what to say. I realize that I have to find a happy medium between merely cutting and pasting my standard "About the Author" bio and giving too much information. I think it is best for me to provide a thumbnail sketch sentence and some current information. I am a prolific well-traveled English professor who teaches at the City University of New York. During the last week or so I haven't gotten out much because I have been consumed with reading the page proofs for my *When Trump Changed: The Feminist Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber*. It is the first single authored short story collection about Trump. I must say that I am very excited about it.

JFG: How do you define being a woman feminist science fiction scholar and how long have you been one?

MSB: I read science fiction through a feminist theory lens. I am particularly interested in how feminist science fiction provides thought experiments to enable readers to step outside patriarchy. I am the first woman English professor to go through the profession defining my field as "science fiction." This was not an easy decision because when I started (I am a Baby Boomer, so the inception of my career did not ensue yesterday), science fiction was thought of as crap and feminist science fiction was defined as being beyond the pale of crap. Being around for so long has proved me to be right. Authors such as the late great Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia E. Butler are valorized. *The Handmaid's Tale* is particularly relevant to this historical moment.

JFG: Can you tell us about why Trump is an inspiration for your writing?

MSB: Where do I start? I could go on for many pages describing why I think the man who is ruining the country is an abomination. Writing in *The New York Times*, Charles M. Blow elegantly and succinctly sums up my feelings: "Trump isn't smart, savvy or sophisticated enough to run this country. He has a skill for demagoguery and emotional manipulation, and he exercised that skill in its full power at precisely the right time to convince enough of America that he should be president. But Trump has only one mode — inferno" ("Trump, Driven by Fear," April 5, 2018, *New York Times*). Or, in my terms, Trump is an orange outrage pussy grabber who demeans the office of the president of the United States to the

extent that it seems science fictionally satirical rather than real. This statement serves as the inspiration for *When Trump Changed*. In addition, I come from Forest Hills, Queens which is a stone's throw away from where Trump grew up in Jamaica Estates. I am ashamed to hail from the same place he does. When I was teaching in Austria, one of my student's told me that she came from Hitler's hometown. I immediately felt very sorry for her. Trump is most certainly not Hitler. But, nonetheless, what I felt for that student now applies to me. I am ashamed of being from where he is from. I decided to channel my proximity to his background into generating Resistance literature.

JFG: What do you hope readers learn from your stories?

MBS: I want readers to respond to my exaggerated humorous visions via being aware that Trump is not normal. He is a gross misogynistic aberration who is not my president. Since there is nothing that anyone (with the exception of Robert Mueller) can do to restore dignity and normalcy to the White House, I hope that my stories will enable people who think like me to use humor to get through the situation. I am, in other words, trying to channel my inner Mel Brooks.

JFG: What tips do you have for inspiring writers?

MBS: Believe in yourself. No matter what, damn the torpedoes and go full speed ahead. I am so happy that as a young scholar I had the courage of my convictions to be a feminist science fiction scholar in the face of sexist men who placed impediments (to say the least) in my path. Those men are now dead. My award winning scholarship is alive and well. And I am here to deviate from scholarship in order to tell the tale of how *The Feminist Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber*.