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Marleen S. Barr

CUNY Borough of Manhattan Community College

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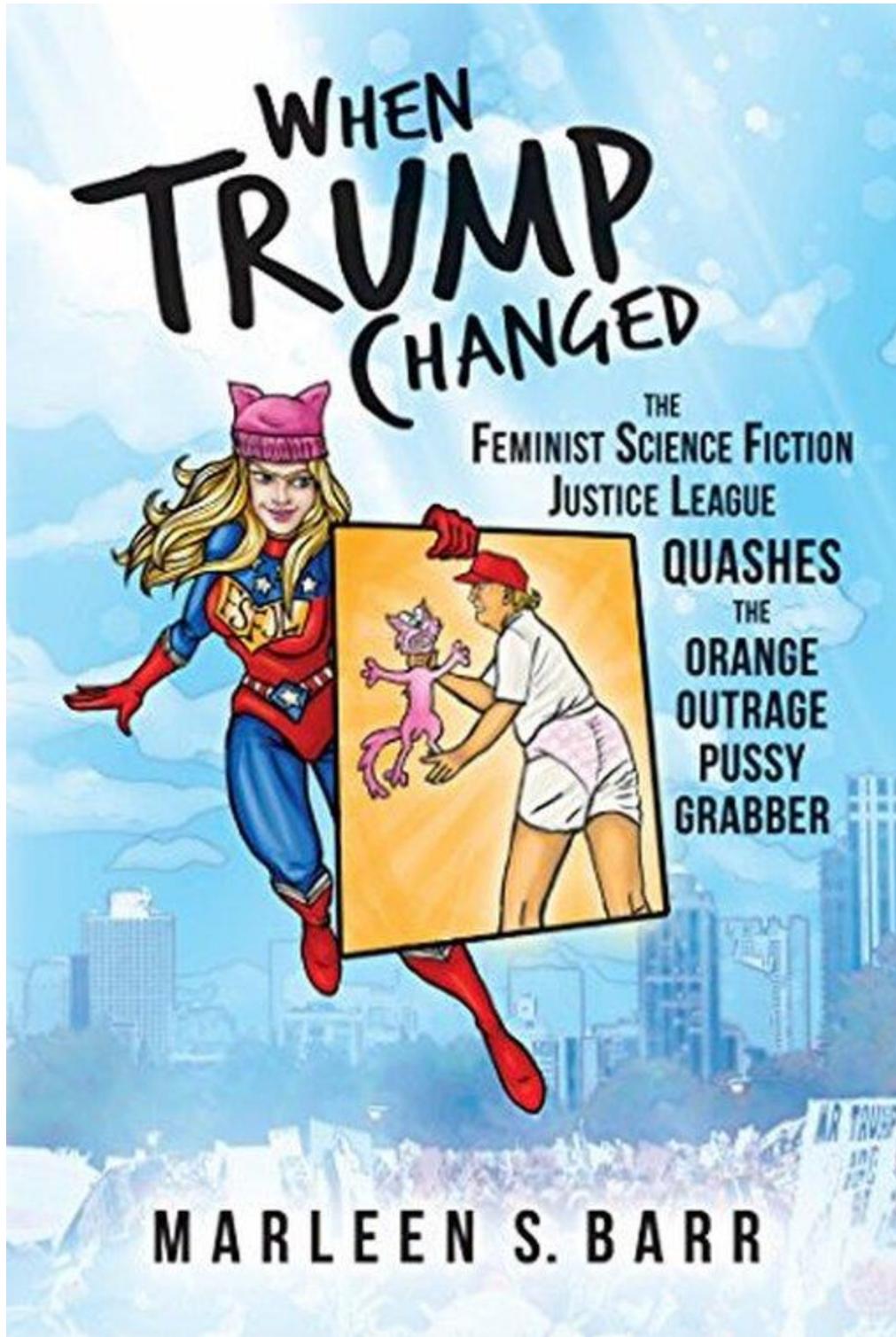
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THE REAL

Creation in Isolation: Marleen S. Barr

July 6, 2020

By The Editors



Marleen S. Barr is a sci-fi scholar, author, and unapologetic feminist. If you've read *Her Plumage*, then you may recognize her name among the contributors.

For today's Creation in Isolation, we talk about the "post-truth" world, predicting political disaster, and topics covered in her short story collection *When Trump Changed: The Feminist*

Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber (B Cubed Press).

What draws the line between science and fiction in this post-truth world?

I think that the line is located between science fiction and reality. As a New Yorker, as a person who looks out of my window and sees the Empire State Building, I suddenly find myself living as a protagonist in a grade-B science fiction movie. Who would have thought that New York has truly come to standstill? Every day I wish that I had a time machine so that I could go back to my life on, say, March 1. I am quarantined in my apartment and I feel homesick. I have spent my professional life as a science fiction scholar. Science fiction about pandemics should stay where it belongs—inside fiction. I do not want to live in this science fiction movie. My science fiction expertise enabled me to see the disaster coming, however. During February, I was the only person wearing a face mask in the subway cars I entered. To the best of my ability, I practiced social distancing when I was teaching. Maybe my science fiction knowledge saved my life.

This question calls for a political as well as an experiential answer. In relation to the virus, Trump's post-truth world consists of replacing science with science fiction rendered as life threatening lies. Telling people that ingesting bleach will provide a cure is science fiction. Telling people that a dangerous medication will provide a cure is science fiction. Trump acted as a science fiction writer when he said that "It's [the virus] going to disappear. One day, it's like a miracle, it will disappear" (February 28, 2020). Trump is promulgating what Harlan Ellison called "dangerous visions." Godzilla and zap guns and death stars and x-wing fighters and—you get the idea—have never killed anyone. Trump's science fiction—his avoidance of the truth when the virus first reached America—has caused death. This former reality television show star is now the death star, the death czar. Truth, science, is the only thing that will save us. In this post-truth world, the science truth teller—Dr. Anthony Fauci—is our needed and appropriate leader. Trump physically towers over Dr. Fauci as he attempts to shut him up. As the virus has truthfully taught us, size does not matter. Science matters. Now that formerly science fictional pandemic literature had become truth, science is our only savior.

What inspired you to create a collection of stories with a sci-fi and political bent?

When scholars get in trouble, they turn to writing as a means to resolve their problems. On the night when Trump was elected, I immediately knew that we were in big trouble. Writing was my only means to deal with the problem. I wrote the short story collection *WHEN TRUMP CHANGED: THE FEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION JUSTICE LEAGUE QUASHES THE ORANGE OUTRAGE PUSSY GRABBER* because I wanted to emphasize that Trump's outrageous behavior should not be met with complacency. The above first question asks about lines. Well, the pussy grabbing thing to my mind went over the line. I used science fiction to counter the outrage. When Trump did god knows what, I called in science fiction to exaggerate his deviations from presidential norms. I called in the feminist extraterrestrials—and all of the science fiction tropes that I know. I was inspired by Mel Brooks' response to Hitler in *THE PRODUCERS*. While I am a molehill in relation to Brooks' mountainous comedic talent (and Trump is not Hitler), using Brooks' example, I set out to use ridicule to respond to Trump.

Tell us about your journey to becoming a science fiction and feminist scholar.

When I was a little kid I did not have any talents. I could not sing, dance, or play the piano. Reading was the only thing that I was good at doing. So I read science fiction. My father bought SUPERMAN comics to entertain me while we were waiting in the car for my mother to join us for the drive from Queens to my grandparents' house in Manhattan. I loved reading about SUPERMAN. In college I was in the cohort which first enrolled in Women's Studies classes. What I was taught about feminism made a lot of sense to me. I knew that I needed a means to demystify patriarchy in order to live my best life. Since female realistic literature protagonists did things like stick their heads in ovens and walk out to sea to drown themselves, I turned to feminist science fiction in order closely to encounter female heroes. Feminist power fantasies empowered me. As an assistant professor, I chose to be a feminist science fiction scholar even though the male scholars who had power over me thought that feminist science fiction was garbage. Well, those men are now dead. Feminist science fiction writers such as Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, and Ursula K. Le Guin are currently valorized. I was right.

Why is it important for people to support the arts, even during times of uncertainty?

The arts are what is getting us through this crisis. What would we do while locked in our homes if we did not have television to watch or books to read? Every day my in-box contains more Zoom links to cultural discussions than I can possibly watch. Having access to some of these on-line events makes my present sequestered life worth living. I am happy to know that numerous intellectual discussions are available to me. Personally speaking, creating art about my virus experience is also helpful. I have already published a virus-centered short story ("Kreplach Kayos Covid." *Pendemic*. Eds. Joy Redmond, Liz Quirke, Niall McArdle, and Ruth McKee. May 6, 2020.). In short, listening to artists and scholars and creating art is helping to keep us centered and vibrant during this crisis.

What are your book recommendations for those who are looking for material to read during mass quarantine?

I hope that people will enjoy my book *When Trump Changed: The Feminist Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber*.

I use the annual Wiscon "Otherwise" feminist speculative fiction award list as a reading list. I recommend this year's winner and the books which received honorable mention.

Winner:

Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater* (Grove Press, 2018)

Honorable Mentions:

Kylie Ariel Bemis, *Dreamborn* (in *Maiden, Mother, Crone*, edited by Gwen Benaway, Bedside Press 2019)

Meg Elison, *The Book of Flora* (47North 2019)
Akwaeke Emezi, *Pet* (Make Me a World 2019)
Kameron Hurley, *Meet Me in the Future* (Tachyon Publications 2019)
Innocent Chizaram Ilo, *Of Warps and Wefts* ([Strange Horizons, March 2018](#); reprinted in *Transcendent 4: The Year's Best Transgender Speculative Fiction*, edited by Bogi Tackás, Lethe Press 2019)
Mary Robinette Kowal, *The Calculating Stars* (Tor Books 2018)
Laurie J. Marks, *The Elemental Logic* series (Fire Logic, Earth Logic, Water Logic, and Air Logic, Small Beer 2019)
Yukiko Motoya, *The Lonesome Bodybuilder* (Soft Skull Press 2018)
Rivers Solomon, *The Deep* (Gallery / Saga Press 2019)
