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## **A Hot Retired Woman Is Finally on Feminist Science Fiction's Radar: Review of Cat Rambo's YOU SEXY THING**

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# A Hot Retired Woman Hero Is Finally on Feminist Science Fiction's Menu: Review of Cat Rambo's *You Sexy Thing*



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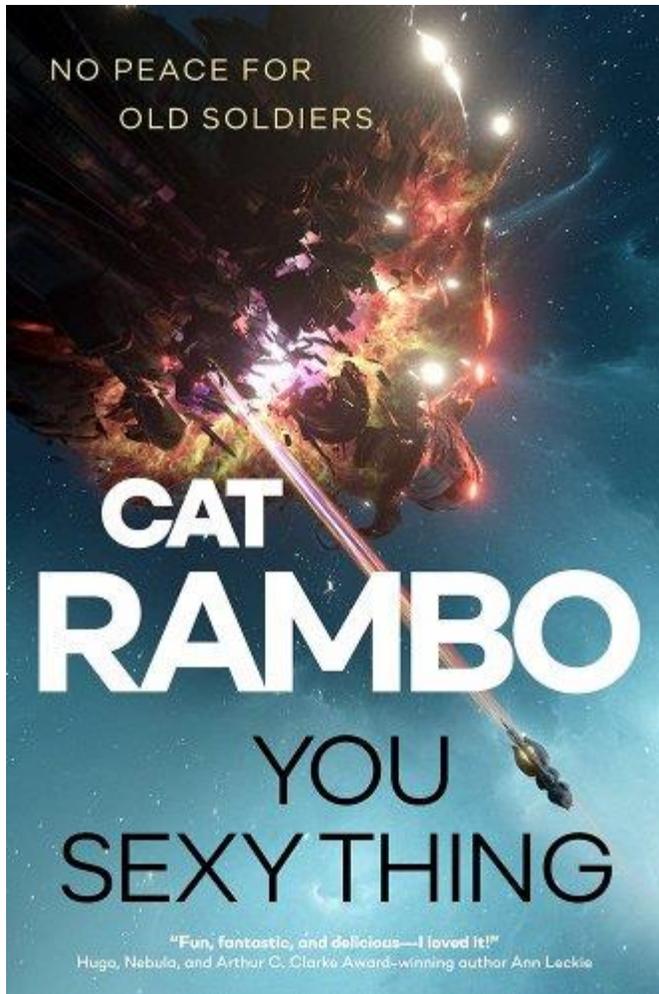
**A Hot Retired Woman Hero Is Finally on Feminist Science Fiction's Menu: Review of Cat Rambo's *You Sexy Thing***

**Marleen S. Barr**

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**Under Review:**

**[You Sexy Thing](#)**. Cat Rambo. Tor Books, November 2021.



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*Why not expand our definition of the heroic to include a wider scope of virtues and strengths that can be tested by other challenges? . . . [Maria] Tatar [in *The Heroine With 1001 Faces*]. . . bumps into the components of such a story, one rooted in the lives traditionally led by women . . . intimately involved in sustaining social and familial bonds.*

**—Laura Miller. “Good Goddess.” *The New York Times Book Review*. December 26, 2021.**

*‘Hacks’ is a comedy, but Jean Smart could break my heart. And she’s an older actress, and she gives me such hope that that kind of career is still possible. There should be older women starring in shows on television. Older actresses have so much more to say.*

—Sharon Gless. “Sharon Gless Loves L.A., and a Good Scare.” *The New York Times*. January 2, 2022

Heroes are different from you and me. This assertion initially holds true for Nicolette “Niko” Larsen, an admiral in the grand army of the Holy Hive Mind, who is the protagonist of Cat Rambo’s at once innovative, hilarious, and poignant novel *You Sexy Thing*. Niko—a hero who leads a community and provides sustenance—epitomizes the female version of Joseph Campbell’s notion of the hero’s journey Maria Tatar describes in *The Heroine With 1001 Faces*. She gallivants across outer space—until she makes an enormous change at the last minute via choosing to stop soldiering on. When she decides to retire and open the Last Chance restaurant located at the edge of the Known Universe on TwiceFar space station—a clear reference to Douglas Adams’s restaurant at the end of the universe—she embraces a personal trajectory available to garden-variety individuals. Niko’s decision shows that Rambo’s emphasis does not involve elevating ordinary people to heroic status. Unlike Tom Stoppard’s attention to flagrantly mundane personages, Rambo does not make an assertion analogous to the announcement that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Instead, she describes a version of Prince Hamlet retaining his exalted status after he eschews his royal position to become a stellar Danish pastry chef.

Rambo’s emphasis aligns with the late Feminist Press and English professor Florence Howe’s attention to Tillie Olsen and feminist historians who reread history from women’s perspectives. Howe asserts that Olsen’s story “I Stand Here Ironing” is important because it highlights a woman’s attention to “the child cry,” not battlefield clamor. Feminist historians point out that armies cannot fight without cooks; Rambo also exalts what women do in that Rambo creates a feminist science fiction hero super-soldier who is an accomplished chef.

Niko is not an important new feminist science fiction hero because she is a black woman who has sex with an exotic female extraterrestrial. She is a ground-breaking new obstreperous female protagonist less for her traditional heroic exploits—her triumphs as a warrior, her exotic extraterrestrial lover—and more for how Rambo connects her identity and her sexiness to cooking. Niko’s attention to an eggplant’s crucial impact on a recipe is, for example, memorable. (Baba ghanoush punk, anyone?) In *You*, the hot food a retiree prepares is as sexy as hot sex. Rambo brilliantly expands the definition of the feminist science fiction hero when she brings a retired female hero—an expansion of Campbell’s notion of what constitutes the heroic—to bear upon the subgenre.

The innovative aliens who frequent Niko’s restaurant are analogous to the diverse extraterrestrials in *Star Trek* as well as those present in the rip-roaring cantina scene in *Star Wars*. What is less immediately apparent and much more interesting is that Niko is akin to her fellow sexy women of retirement age: *Golden Girls* protagonist Blanche Devereaux (played by the late Rue McClanahan) and *Hacks* protagonist Deborah Vance (played by Jean Smart). The sentient spaceship named *You Sexy Thing* can

travel at a velocity of “twelve leguins.” What could be more sexy than Ursula speaking truth to power? When receiving the 2014 Distinguished Contribution to American Letters at the National Book Awards ceremony, she bravely referred to “all the writers that were excluded from literature for so long; my fellow authors of fantasy and science fiction”; Rambo offers a corrective to the exclusion of sexy retiree protagonists from feminist science fiction.

The names of *You Sexy Thing*'s characters are to die for. Restaurant critic Lolola Montaigne d'Arcy deBurgh and sadistic villain pirate Tubal Last are standouts as original as Adams's Zaphod Beeblebrox. “Nicolette Larsen” seemingly pales in comparison—until the name is seen as a juxtaposition of lauded Harlem Renaissance author Nella Larsen and groundbreaking science fiction hero actress Nichelle Nichols, who portrayed Uhura in the original run of *Star Trek*. Niko follows in Lt. Uhura's footsteps and, like Nella Larsen, defies easy categorization. Rambo acts as a communications officer who redefines the definition of “hero” by ascribing sexuality, respect, and excitement to a retired woman who remains heroic.

In addition to Devereaux and Vance, Niko shares something in common with another no longer young woman we need to see more of: the fifty something Carrie Bradshaw appearing in the *Sex and the City* update *And Just Like That*. Soon after recovering from hip surgery, Carrie is once again able to trod across New York clad in killer stilettos and drop dead gorgeous outfits. Carrie is still a sexy thing. And so is a real Carrie: at age fifty-four Carrie-Anne Moss is again playing Trinity in *Matrix Resurrections*.

Rambo, a contemporary of Carrie and Carrie-Anne, is a vibrant contributing sexy thing too. *You Sexy Thing* is her first novel which she published at age fifty-eight. You go girl! Retiree hero Michelle Obama (who was born one year after Rambo in 1964) is sexy too—and is akin to Rambo. Obama appeared in a New Year's eve photo welcoming 2022 as no first lady has appeared before: while calling Barack Obama her “boo,” she is pictured with one arm akimbo and the other arm slung across her husband's neck while bare legged and attired in black short shorts, strappy kitten heels, and blue toe nail polish.

When Niko (and, to my mind, Rambo) say “Make it so,” they recast and reclaim a role more typically reserved for male heroes. Niko and Rambo triumph. They experience “Adventure” (Niko's final utterance) and, in terms of the novel's at once sexual and accomplishment-ridden vibrant last word, “*excitement*.” Niko returns to space faring adventuring after her restaurateur phase. She shows that retirement, no fixed definition, can be a heroic enterprise which entails evolving. The Last Chance restaurant never reopens after TwiceFar space station is destroyed; it is a waystation in Niko's life progression, not her last chance.

I feel excited by engaging with Rambo's new expanded conception of the feminist science fiction hero. Channeling my inner Lolola Montaigne d'Arcy deBurgh, I declare that *You Sexy Thing* is scrumptious.

Savor it.

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**Dr. Marleen S. Barr** is known for her pioneering work in feminist science fiction. 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 science fiction issue of *PMLA*. She is the author of the novels *Oy Pioneer!* and ***Oy Feminist Planets: A Fake Memoir***. Her ***When Trump Changed: The Feminist Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber*** is the first single authored Trump short story collection. It is followed by *This Former President: Science Fiction as Retrospective Retrorocket Jettisons Trumpism*.

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