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Power of the Narrator (Review)

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the horror—that is fantastika’s most essential encounter with modernity, though he might have cited alongside Kurtz such paradigmatic figures as Benjamin’s impotent Angel of History, who sees only catastrophes in the storm of progress blowing us away from Paradise, or Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, for whom history is a nightmare from which he is fighting to awaken. For Clute, Horror is the most vital form of fantastika because the horror at its core is always that of recognition, of seeing truths one does not want to see but cannot ignore: “It is the task of modern horror to rend the veil of illusion, to awaken us. Horror (or Terror) is sight.... Horror (or Terror) is what happens when you find out the future is true” (42).

Here, I think, we can see Clute’s theoretical contribution to the larger field of sf studies most clearly. Where the Suvinian/Jamesonian approach to sf has always tended to focus on literary figurations of utopia (either as a manifest *program* or as a latent *impulse*), Clute’s fantastika is in some basic sense *incompatible* with utopia. His approach argues not only that the genres of fantastika are “inherently better designed to sight disaster than to plan solutions,” but also that “it may in fact be the case that sighting and planning are very nearly incompatible operations of the human imagination” (54-55). The task before fantastika is not to *change* history, then, but to *recognize* it—and so the formal aesthetic undergirding all fantastika becomes not utopia but “planetary dread” (55). But Clute’s version of the genre is no less politically relevant for this revision. Where postmodernity for Jameson denotes the exhaustion of our ability to conceive of History, or of a future that might be different from the present, postmodernity for Clute is similarly “a series of exercises in denial” and “the creation of a world society founded in amnesia” (68). But the temporal orientation of our resistance to this crisis has been entirely reversed. At the end of Clute’s extended meditations, we find that fantastika is not really a genre of the future at all. It is instead a genre of the past, of history—what Milan Kundera called the struggle of memory against forgetting.—Gerry Canavan, Duke University

The Power of the Narrators. L. Timmel Duchamp. *Narrative Power: Encounters, Celebrations, Struggles*. Seattle, WA: Aqueduct, 2010. 260 + viii pp. \$19 pbk.

This collection of sixteen essays explores the powerful effects of various narrative strategies in shaping our lives. The essays are mostly written by sf/f authors, along with a few academics. Of course, the boundary is not absolute—many of the writers have backgrounds in academia and, of course, Samuel R. Delany is an active professor as is Susan Palwick. The majority of these essays grapple with the ways in which narrative has been used to disempower or to liberate subjugated groups; therein lies the collection’s inherent interest as well as its oversight. Certainly narrative is of central importance to the human experience, and understanding its function can help us to take control of that experience. At the same time, many of the essays in this collection overstate the power of narrative, effacing the way material power determines our lives. Too many of these essays present material power as an

outcome of ideological—or narrative—constructions (the distinction between narrative and ideology is practically non-existent in most of these essays), rather than the other way round, with little or no support for this underlying assumption.

The collection is divided into three sections, with the first exploring narrative considerations in the study of history as well as in sociological analysis. The second section presents a more literary consideration of narrative. The book closes with a third section in which several writers put forth ideas about how best to use narrative. The first section contains two excellent pieces. Rebecca Wanzo analyzes the craze for stories of missing white girls that seized the national news media in the last twenty years. She deftly identifies the traits that propel such a story from family horror to national event, discusses stories of endangerment and harm that do not make the news, and continues with a nuanced, incisive explanation of why the more popular narratives are paradoxically comforting to those who accept the dominant ideologies informing contemporary American culture. In a very different vein, editor Duchamp's beautifully written piece illuminates the competing claims and concerns that the professional historian must balance in deciding how to tell the past. Ought she to focus on individual lives, or must every case study illustrate a larger historical trend? What is lost when we value professional detachment over emotional response? Should a professional historian be interested in the same things that interest a lay reader? It is clear where Duchamp's sympathies lie with respect to these questions, but even for the reader who comes to a different conclusion, her concerns and experiences provide a clear, poignant understanding of what is at stake.

In the book's second section, Andrea Hairston's essay on the combination of fantastic and mimetic narrative employed by Guillermo del Toro in the film *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) is one of the collection's true stand-outs. With the combination of sophisticated analysis, humor, high intelligence, insight, and affecting emotion that marks all this author's work, it analyzes the confusion of both critics and movie-goers at the movie's refusal to either validate or dismiss as imagination the fantastic events it depicts. Hairston then explicates how the fantastic serves not as an escape from, but as an engagement with, fascism, "the Fairy Tale nightmare of our contemporary world" (148). Rebecca Wanzo appears again in this section, this time with a fascinating essay about the connections among nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, contemporary self-help books, and Octavia Butler's *PARABLE* novels (1993-98). In the final section, various writers suggest ways to handle responsibly the power of literature, with Delany considering the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, especially when it comes to cliché, in a complex and satisfying piece.

Other contributions, unfortunately, do not live up to this high standard. Carolyn Ives Gilman presents an essay decrying the effect of postmodernism on humanities academics of the 1980s and extolling the importance of evidence-based narratives, even while presenting no citations or evidence for her own assertions about various Native American conceptions of time. Gilman's piece is one of a few that ascribes a great deal of power to humanities academics, far

more than, in my experience, we actually have, and makes generalizations based on academic trends that are, at this point, at least twenty years old. Rachel Swirsky writes a good-hearted essay about how progressive writers ought to use their stories to promote progressive ideologies and avoid stereotypical clichés about oppressed groups; there is nothing wrong with what she says, but she is far from breaking new ground. Nonetheless, this book will be much appreciated by scholars who are interested in the ways that writers consciously articulate their mission, and other scholars will turn to it for the fine essays by Hairston, Wanzo, Delany, and Duchamp.—**Veronica Schanoes, Queens College, CUNY**

Retrolabeling and the Origins of SF. Rachel Haywood Ferreira. *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2011. xi + 304 pp. \$80 hc; \$29.95 pbk.

Like many other books, this one delves more deeply into topics previously considered by the author: Haywood Ferreira's dissertation (2004), the 2008 article "Back to the Future: The Expanding Field of Latin American Science Fiction" (*Hispania* 91.2), and another essay entitled "The First Wave: Latin American Science Fiction Discovers Its Roots," which was published in *SFS* in 2007. The result is a much-needed, well-written account of the origins of the genre in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil from 1850 to 1920—which Haywood Ferreira calls, not without explanation, the nineteenth century (11).

While previous comprehensive works in this area have mostly provided lists of publications, with some modest criticism (such as the "Chronology of Latin American Science Fiction, 1775-2005" that appeared in *SFS* in 2007), Haywood Ferreira's study delves in detail into several works from the three countries mentioned, presenting them as representative of the development of the genre in the entire region. Although many of these works have not been considered sf before, Haywood Ferreira goes back to Hugo Gernsback's "retrolabeling" technique in *Amazing Stories*, which constructed precursors for the modern genre, in order to include them as sf in her account. Acknowledging that this action is nothing more than the product of a "desire for the stature and legitimacy that identifiable ancestors bestow upon their descendents" (1), Haywood Ferreira chooses works by famous Latin American authors whose oeuvre was not considered sf, or at least not until recently. In doing this, she argues for a Latin American tradition that had seemed nonexistent before. What is more, she affirms that early sf in the region was not merely the product of foreign imitation—as had largely been the case since the pulp era—but rather that it focused on regional problems and emerged out of local debates such as nation building, the quintessential Latin American *civilización y barbarie* conflict, and the relevance of science and progress in the modernization debates of new nation states. Haywood Ferreira affirms that "[p]rior to the heyday of the pulp era ... sf was not so thoroughly perceived as an external genre that was unrelated to Latin American realities," and also that "strong links [had not] yet been forged between sf and popular culture" (3). Indeed, sf was read only by elites—men mostly, especially those with scientific and literary knowledge (5).