

Title: “Pretending to Write About the Future”: Speculative Fiction as a Lens on the Now

Date/Time: 12:10pm - 1:25pm on Saturday March 26, 2022

Location: 113C, Pennsylvania Convention Center, 100 Level

Event Description:

“Science fiction is a great way to pretend you are writing about the future when in reality you are attacking the recent past and the present.” As Ray Bradbury suggests in this quote, many readers and writers turn to speculative fiction not to wonder about what might happen so much as to think about what’s already happening. Five writers and editors will share their experiences working with sci-fi that, rather than being an escape, serves as an engagement or confrontation with the present.

Event Category: Fiction Craft and Criticism

Event Agenda:

The moderator will introduce the panelists and facilitate a discussion through a series of questions on the topic. (See below for questions.) We’ll wrap up with time for questions from the attendees.

Event Organizer/Moderator/Panelist:

David Ebenbach is the author of eight books of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, including the novel *How to Mars*. He teaches Creative Writing and Literature at Georgetown University and is a project manager at Georgetown’s teaching center, the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship.

Panelists:

Elly Bangs is a Seattle-based science fiction and fantasy author. Her recently-released debut novel, *Unity*, explores the human condition and contemporary global issues through an explosion-rich, post-apocalyptic cyberpunk lens.

Jaymee Goh writes, reviews, and edits speculative fiction whose work has been published in *Science Fiction Studies*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*. She is a

graduate from the Clarion Workshop and works for Tachyon Publications.

Rone Shavers is author of the experimental Afrofuturist novel *Silverfish*, recently shortlisted for a CLMP Firecracker Award. His writing has appeared in *Big Other*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Bomb*, and elsewhere. Shavers is also a fiction editor at *Obsidian: Literature and Arts in the African Diaspora*.

Sheree Renée Thomas is the editor of the two-time World Fantasy Award-winning *DARK MATTER* anthologies, author of *Nine Bar Blues: Stories from an Ancient Future*, *Sleeping Under the Tree of Life*, and is the Associate Editor of *OBSIDIAN* and the Editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

Order of Events:

1. Panelists answer questions from the moderator (60 minutes):
 - a. The basic theme we're looking at here is the way that speculative fiction has the ability to talk not just about the future or other worlds but about our own world, right here, right now, and also our history. When you were growing up, which authors (or other kinds of storytellers) taught you that that was possible? Answers may include:
 - i. I actually didn't read SF authors growing up because books are expensive in Third World Countries. So, *Star Trek*, *Soylent Green*, and assorted cartoons (especially the ones with the little "lessons" at the end).
 - ii. All the usual suspects, I guess. But I'd also like to mention that all fiction is speculative, at least in some form or fashion. That is to say, good fiction presents a world outside the mundane one we see around us, so not everything has to be some sort of space-laser shoot 'em up!
 - iii. It's true that all fiction is speculative, so my experiences range all over the place. In the sci-fi world, Bradbury does stand out for me: *Fahrenheit 451*, for sure. George Orwell, too. But a lot of my excitement came from reading magical realism, like Salman Rushdie—*Shame* and *Midnight's*

Children—and a lot of stuff by Isabelle Allende and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

- b. What kinds of speculative projects have you been working on? What do you hope they're saying about the present and recent past? Why use speculative fiction to get at them? Answers may include:
- i. steampunk, critiquing colonialism and imperialism today with alternate visions of the past; fun portal fantasies to critique normative expectations; I use these to think through current conversations on gender & disability
 - ii. Aah, here's where we get into something. In our present moment, to be a BIPOC is to live something of a speculative (at worst) or surreal (at best) life. I mean, right now there are women in Fairfax county, VA who firmly believe that my putting pen to paper and not aggrandizing some nostalgic notion of "One America" will somehow make their children uncomfortable. I could go on, but it's all to say that the answer to your question is, really, that we slouch a little closer towards Fahrenheit 451 with every given day. Why use speculative fiction? Because it reflects the true state of the world all around us...
 - iii. I've been relocating basically ordinary humans to other planets—Mars and Venus, mainly—in order to see the way human baggage and relationships and struggles probably extend to other planetary settings. Like, how do we handle living in a society in decay? And I've drawn up an alternate dimension for Jews to escape to, to see if people will finally be okay with Jews if we're in a different dimension. Spoiler alert: no.
- c. Which contemporary speculative authors do you admire for the way they take on real-world experiences and issues? Answers may include:
- i. NK Jemisin, her short fiction especially; B Lemberg (I'm super biased tho!), doing work on representations of queerness and neurodivergence; Tobias Buckell, with satires on various aspects of current capitalist society

- ii. There are the legends: Octavia Butler, Chip Delany, and although he often gets overlooked, Ishmael Reed; and then there are the legends-soon-to-be: Alexis Pauline Gumbs, NK Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, and Sheree Renee Thomas (one can also add Renee Gladden in there, depending on how one defines speculative). That said, I don't read tons of speculative fiction, and while there are tons of other authors I could include (again, by stretching the boundaries of the category), for reasons of time, space, and wanting to big-up contemporary Black women authors, those are my picks.
 - iii. I love Charles Yu for his ability to refract human longing through a sci-fi lens, Ted Chiang for raising timeless ethical issues, Ursula K Le Guin and Kameron Hurley for rethinking gender in fascinating ways, Michael Chabon and Simone Zelitch for imagining alternate histories for the Jewish people—for starters.
- d. What would you like to see more of in speculative fiction?
Answers may include:
- i. More non-English.
 - ii. See answers above, because good God, how I would love it if more authors would change/challenge the idea of precisely how and what we think is “speculative,” if only so the genre could grow! A reliance on clear definition and aesthetic overdetermination = stagnation.
 - iii. Similarly, I'd love to see walls crashing down between genres. I'd love to see literary readers open themselves up to the possibility that literature can happen in a genre, and I'd love to see genre readers open themselves up to the possibility that literary fiction can provide a great read.
- e. Other issues that might come up: Examples of people missing the point in science fiction due to lost historical context? Also the reaction to people who don't like it when we get social justice cooties on a “fun” genre?

2. Panelists answer questions from the audience (15 minutes).