HUGO AWARD 2014

VOTER PACKET

Best Fanzine

Dear Hugo Voter,

In 2008, we would have laughed if you told us that we would be nominated for a Hugo Award. Yet… here we are. This is real. This is happening. In addition to the surprise and the sense of pride that we feel, we are above of all thankful to those who nominated us for Best Fanzine.

For those who haven't the faintest idea who we are, however, please allow us to introduce ourselves:

Like many foolhardy ideas, The Book Smugglers was born of a time of great adversity. Faced with threats from our significant others concerning the overwhelming volume of books purchased on a daily basis, Ana Grilo (UK-based Brazilian) and Thea James (US-based Filipino-American) resorted to "smuggling" books home in huge handbags to avoid scrutiny. In 2008, we founded The Book Smugglers - a review blog dedicated to speculative and genre fiction for all ages, and an outlet for our bottomless obsession with books and assorted SFF popgeekery.

For nearly seven years, we've published daily posts on The Book Smugglers, from our trademark incisive reviews to author articles and blogger essays. We've hosted interviews, giveaways, and round-up articles. We take pride in our consistency and our uncompromising criticism of genre fiction. More importantly, we are passionate about diversity and inclusivity, especially when it comes to speculative fiction fandom.

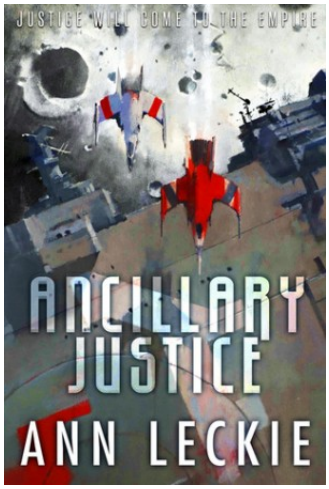
In this packet, you'll find seven of our regular reviews (both of the solo and joint/conversational variety), and a selection of three guest posts published on The Book Smugglers in the past year. This includes entries in two features we launched in 2013: SFF in Conversation (a monthly feature in which we invite guests to talk about a variety of topics important to the SFF community, with a special focus on inclusivity and diversity) and Old School Wednesdays (a weekly feature in which we take a break from the new and shiny to review books that are at least 5 years old).

We sincerely hope you enjoy these posts. Thanks for reading!

Ana and Thea
Your Friendly Neighborhood Book Smugglers

Joint Review: *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie

By Ana & Thea | Originally Posted 10/4/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/10/joint-review-ancillary-justice-by-ann-leckie.html



Genre: Science Fiction

Publisher: Orbit
Publication Date: October 1 2013
Hardcover: 416 Pages

Stand alone or series: First in a series

How did we get this book: Review copies from the publisher

Format (e- or p-): e-ARC and print

Why did we read this book: We've both had *Ancillary Justice* on the radar for *ages* and have been dying to read it – especially since we've seen so many awesome reviews for the book. (Seriously, we can't remember seeing a single negative review for this title.)

REVIEW

Ana's Take:

> *Thoughts that lead to action can be dangerous. Thoughts that do not, mean less than nothing.*

I haven't felt this excited about a debut since I first read and *adored The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* by N.K. Jemisin. Yes, this is that good. But more than that, *Ancillary Justice* is exciting because it is *fun* as well as clever and makes me want to jump up and down and hand copies to just about everybody I know. It hits all of my sweet spots, too, in terms of how the narrative is constructed, in the way that we could question the complete reliability of its narrator, and the thought-provoking topics that it addresses (both directly and indirectly) whilst still being thrilling and easy to read.

Here is the gist of the book: in the far, far, *far* future, the Radch empire has conquered – and annexed – the galaxy. The main character is called Breq and she (more on that later) used to be the spaceship *Justice of Toren* and all of its ancillaries, an AI whose consciousness used to be divided into multiple segments (or, bodies of dead soldiers) and who is now one, alone, separated.

The narrative alternates between now and then. The "now" shows Breq as the last surviving segment of *Justice of Toren*, on a – for all intents and purposes – suicide mission to kill The Lord of the Radch. The "then" part of the narrative takes place 18 years before the present time when Breq was still *Justice of Toren* and present at the annexation of a new planet when things go awry. The timelines proceed in a crescendo toward Moment of Doom as the revelations pile up and the extent of Breq's motivation – and why she is no longer part of collective mind she used to be – are explored.

In a way *Ancillary Justice* is a study about identity, of the "I am" and what it means to be this "I." Breq was *Justice of Toren* for two thousand years before she became a separate entity. Who is Breq, how it/she identifies, the question of whether she can even be human is explored and examined in multiple occasions throughout the novel. There is a question of *person* but also of *personality* and it is both thoughtful and fun to follow Breq in her journey.

But beyond the personal, the book also scrutinises the idea of the "I" in planetary terms too; it evaluates the idea of cohesion of different peoples from different social standing under one empire, and the extent that this is even a peaceful possibility. The Radch empire is one that is viewed from multiples perspectives – internally and externally, from people who have been Radchaai from birth to those who have become Radchaai after annexation, from those who believe in the positive aspects of colonisation to those who only see the negative (and even those who see both). It's interesting that in their language "citizen" and "civilization" are almost interchangeable.

Is the Radch empire and its colonisation simply straightforward evil? Or is there room for more subtle approaches? The idea of social change is at the core of the novel and as such, the exploration of the moral issues regarding empire, colonisation and personal choice.

I do love for example how Breq observes an encounter between a non-Radchaai child and its parent after a stressful situation:

> *"A Radchaai parent would have put her arms around her daughter, kissed her, told her how relieved she was her daughter was well, maybe even would have wept. Some Radchaai would have thought this parent cold and affectionless. But I was sure that would have been a mistake. They sat down together on a bench, sides touching, as the girl gave her report, what she knew of the patient's condition, and what had happened out in the snow with the herd, and the ice devil. When she had finished, her mother patted her twice on the knee, briskly, and it was as though she were suddenly a different girl, taller, stronger, now she had, it seemed, not only her mother's strong, comforting presence, but her approval."*

Obviously there are considerable problems with the Radchaai and their empire (to put it very, very mildly indeed) but I loved that being cold and emotionless was not one of those problems. Past that, I also love the acknowledgement above that there are different ways of showing affection. This is only one of many details that made this book so wonderful to me.

And then we have the question of language especially when it concerns the use of pronouns. The Radch do have gender identity but that identity is not discernible by the way they look or dress or by the roles they have. And so, Breq's language – Radchaai language – doesn't have gendered pronouns so she uses only one pronoun – "she" – to refer to all characters (expect for when she is speaking in another language that does have gendered pronouns). This is of course, a pointed authorial choice and it does have interesting (and inevitable) repercussions on how one reads the book. I was constantly telling myself off because I kept trying to guess the gender of each character and to force them into one or another gender. So on top of everything, this is also a book that allowed me to confront my own fucked-up ideas of gender and binaries for which I am thankful.

I hope that these thoughts don't make it sound as though *Ancillary Justice* is a difficult, inaccessible book. Because I don't think it is: beyond the exploration of identity, the limitations of humanity and of the consequences of imperialism it also has awesome moments that show the importance of loyalty and friendship, for example. It has gut-wrenching moments of violence but also super cool adventurous moments. Plus, it's all about personal *revenge* and social/political change.

I love this – LOVED THIS. It's definitely a top 10 book of 2013 for me. Actually, this might well be my favourite novel of 2013 so far. I can't think of the last time I was this excited about a sequel.

Thea's Take:

I wholeheartedly agree with Ana – I cannot find a fault in this truly amazing, awe-inspiring *debut novel* from Ann Leckie (an author who has instantly become an "auto-buy" for me). *Ancillary Justice* is the real deal. It's easily the best science fiction novel I've read since Stephen Baxter's *Ark* – and in all honesty, *Justice* is a far superior book in terms of scope, worldbuilding and writing. Let me revise that: *Ancillary Justice* is one of the best science fiction novels I've *ever* read. This is not hyperbole; *Ancillary Justice* is just that damn good.

As Ana says, this is a book set in the very, very distant future. It is a future in which the Radchaai have conquered and annexed societies throughout the universe, absorbing different peoples and systems into its ever-expansive reach. The Radch are masters of the galaxy, with superior technology and warships that are actual sentient forms of artificial intelligence, with numerous (human) bodies – ancillaries – controlled by that same intelligence. To quote another fictional alien collective, *Resistance is futile*. The Radch always win, and anyone that opposes them is silenced – through death, or their human bodies are put into the ancillary program (essentially the same thing as death). It is against this backdrop that *Ancillary Justice* is set, diving into the story of one such Radchaai warship that has fallen from grace. We don't know what has happened to Breq, the main character of this book, other than the fact that she is a single consciousness that was once the formidable *Justice of Toren* with thousands of ancillary bodies and parts. Through chapters that alternate between real-time and flashbacks, we learn Breq's story and her reason for vengeance.

You'll notice I used female pronouns for Breq – although gender is something entirely fluid in *Ancillary Justice*, as is the concept of a single self or consciousness. Combined with Leckie's awe-inspiring attention to language and cultural detail, these concept of self and gender are some of the most fascinating parts of this astonishing novel. As Ana says, the Radch have no concept of gender and everyone is referred to, simply, in the feminine. Breq/One Esk/Justice of Toren is both "I" and "many" – a type of hive collective that is many, but all under a single, singular consciousness. It's hard to describe Breq, because as an artificial intelligence, one doesn't want to foist human characteristics and labels in an attempt to personify her – that would be wrong. Breq is complex, an unreliable narrator, and one who displays human emotions but is decidedly not human. Breq is Breq, who has lived for centuries in myriad bodies – more akin to the failings, I think, of the Cylons in the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica*, than, say Data of *Star Trek TNG*. Even that comparison isn't accurate – but it's hard to describe the amazing feat of characterization and writing that Ann Leckie has pulled off with *Ancillary Justice*; suffice it to say, your notions of self and gender and sentience will be provoked, torn apart, and rearranged.

Similarly, I loved the focus on language and culture in this book. Breq is constantly questioning her use of pronouns and assigning gender to different non-Radch peoples; similarly, polyglot Breq alone is attuned to the nuances of language and culture and shares that knowledge with the reader. For example:

> *"What's the difference," Lieutenant Awn said, so quietly it didn't seem like a break in the silence, "between citizens and noncitizens?"*
>
> *"One is civilized," said Lieutenant Skaaiat said with a laugh, "and the other isn't." The joke only made sense in Radchaai – citizen and civilized are the same word. To be Radchaai is to be civilized.*

This kind of attention to detail – relayed by the protagonist in a clever, non-infodumpy way, is brilliant in my mind. This is to say nothing of the exquisite detail of varying cultures, from music to parenting styles, from Radch armor to the importance of genetics and bloodlines that are disclosed and discovered throughout Breq's narrative. I mean, *damn* this book is impressive.

And of course, at its heart, this is a revenge story. We learn what has happened to Breq, now just a single ancillary body, and *damn* it's a good reveal. The way the story unfolds, alternating between the then and now, is wholly engaging. I know that the concepts in this book sound both abstract and complicated, but in truth *Ancillary Justice* (though dense) is an easy book to read because it is so immersive and never once stumbles in its telling. Above all else – or, to stick with the theme of collectiveness – *Ancillary Justice* is more than just the sum of its parts. Like Breq, *Ancillary Justice* is utterly memorable, utterly distinct, and utterly original.

I loved this book, and it is without question one of my top 10 best reads of 2013 – possibly one of my top 10 science fiction reads, ever.

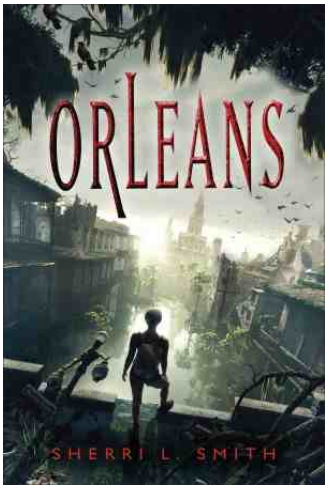
Rating:

Ana: Dare I? I can't really think of a single thing that is not right about the book. So Yeah: 10

Thea: 10 – Utter Perfection

Book Review: *Orleans* by Sherri L. Smith

By Thea | Originally Posted 3/12/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/03/book-review-orleans-by-sherri-l-smith.html



Genre: Post-Apocalypse, Dystopia, Speculative Fiction, Young Adult

Publisher: Putnam Juvenile
Publication Date: March 2013
Hardcover: 336 Pages

Stand alone or series: I have no idea – it can be read and contained as a standalone (a gut-wrenching punch of a standalone) but has room for future installments

How did I get this book: ARC from the Publisher

Format (e- or p-): Print ARC

Why did I read this book: I've been dying to read Sherri L. Smith's work, ever since I saw the synopsis for *Flygirl* (Ana beat me to the punch). When I saw the synopsis for *Orleans*, and we were contacted about being part of the blog tour, I instantly pounced on the opportunity.

Trigger Warning: Rape

Review:

Words like "gritty" and "powerful" are thrown around so frequently, especially in describing the new wave of post-apocalyptic and dystopian fare, that they've lost their significance. But, at the risk of sounding cliche, I will say it because if ever a title deserved these words, it is this book: *Orleans* is *gritty*. It is real. And it is *powerful*.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall, killing 971 people. Over the next fifteen years, hurricanes continue to batter the Mississippi River delta, culminating with Hurricane Jesus on October 20, 2019. Jesus is a system of unprecedented size and intensity, and kills an estimated 8,000 people after making landfall, leaving fewer than 10,000 survivors in its wake. Those that do survive face other horrors – deadly debris, a lack of basic necessities (like clean water and food), and subsequent violent crime.

And then, the Delta Fever.

A powerful bloodborne virus, Delta Fever infects and spreads without discrimination. Refugees that are evacuated from Nola and the surrounding regions bring the fever with them, causing an epidemic the likes of which haven't been seen since the Spanish Flu a century earlier. In response, the government walls off the waterlogged, infected states of Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, Georgia and

Texas. A permanent quarantine is put into effect (until such time as a cure is found), and these states are no longer a part of the country. And in this new, wild, world of infection and death, Orleans is born.

Fen de la Guerre is one of Orleans' children – fierce and hardened, Fen has grown up in the Delta and knows its rules and lessons all too well. An OP (that is, O-positive blood type), like the rest of her tribe and others of the O-phenotype, Fen is a carrier of the Fever but isn't affected by the disease. And, like her fellow O-types, this means that she faces incredible danger – the other As, Bs, and ABs contract the Fever and deteriorate quickly unless they receive fresh infusions of blood from universal donors – and they hunt, farm, and bleed Os in their desperation. It is this desperation that wipes out Fen's tribe of OPs, leaving Fen on the run with her beloved friend's newborn child. Fen knows too well the horrors that could befall an orphan in Orleans, and vows to keep the child alive and get her to the Outer States beyond the quarantine wall before the baby becomes infected with Delta Fever. On this mission, Fen's path crosses with an outsider – an idealist and doctor, whose research could mean the Delta Fever's cure, or its weaponization.

I admit that I was drawn to this book in part because it sounded reminiscent of one of my favorite films of last year: the resonant indie hit, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Beyond similarities in premise and setting, this book is also reminiscent of that film in terms of scope and raw emotional power. Like *Beasts*, *Orleans* has the same intensity and heartbreak; the same type of fierce, courageous heroine. But *Orleans* is undoubtedly a darker animal than that film.

The newest novel from Sherri L. Smith, *Orleans* is (as I've said before) a *powerful* book. It's a frightening look at what might happen to a world ravaged by climate change and a devastating epidemic – one that fractures a society into tribes of violence and even cannibalistic (exsanguinistic?) extremes. This might not be a book for everyone – it is *dark*, people. This is a world rife with abuse, rape, blood farming, and violence – but it's also a book about the desperate struggle and right to survive. A story with hope at its heart, in the midst of so much blood and death. And *this*, this juxtaposition of hope in such unflinching brutality, is what makes *Orleans* such a resonant and important book.

In other words: I loved *Orleans*. I loved it deeply, painfully, and wholeheartedly.

From a pure plotting and worldbuilding perspective, *Orleans* is nuanced and utterly believable. This future world, hit by hurricane after hurricane, then rising water levels, then plague and isolation, might be a hyperbolic one – but it feels frighteningly plausible. The deadly Delta Fever and its dividing lines by blood type is also a unique and particularly horrific epidemic – even if this is the stuff of medical horror-fantasy, the rules of this particular fever make sense (and thus, allow for suspension of disbelief). Suffice it to say, *Orleans* is a grim tale and one that, to me, felt very, very real.

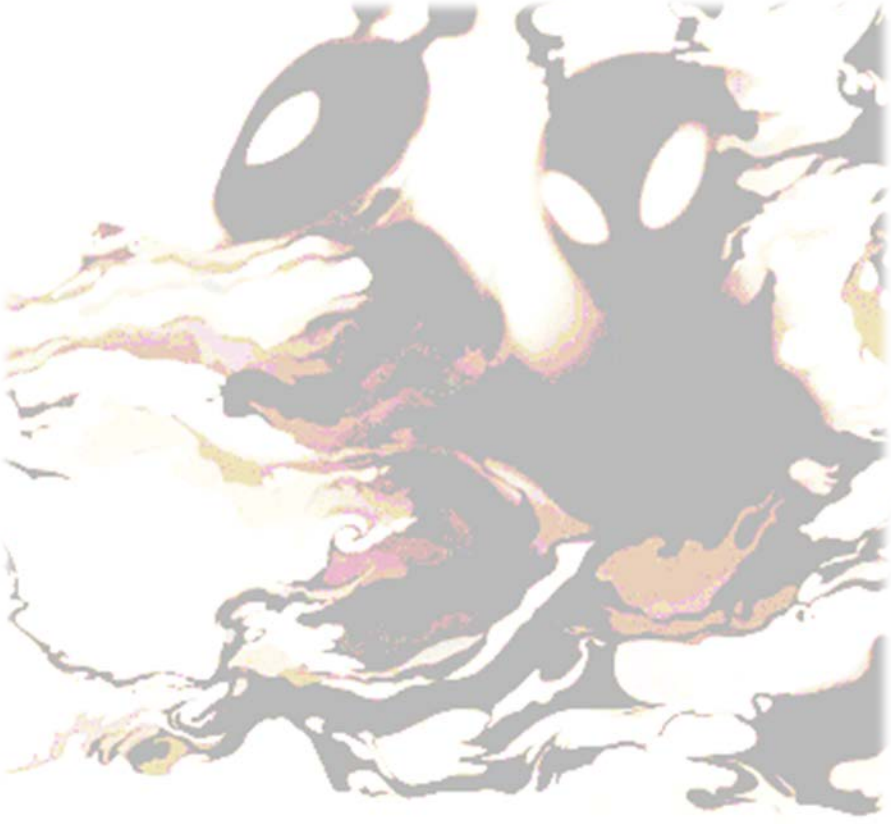
Heroine Fen de la Guerre – a beautiful and fitting name for our whip-sharp protagonist – is one for the ages. Fiercely loyal, Fen has grown up in the most nightmarish of dystopias. After losing her parents, she is taken in by some very bad people and has fought her way free from abuse, finding a new home, a new tribe, and a new family. Fen is a fighter, and her will to survive is the driving force of this book. I love that in spite of everything she has been through and every fresh horror she faces, she never lets go of that powerful flame of hope. I love that Fen is wholly capable, that she figures out her own way to save her friend's child – unlike other dystopian heroes, Fen cares first and foremost about survival. Not how she looks. Not about a dreamy teenage boy that swoops in to help her out in the nick of time. Fen's priority is the life of her best friend's baby girl.

Of course, Fen is not the only character in this story – her cutting narrative is joined by that of Doctor Daniel Weaver, an idealistic outlander who crosses the wall into Orleans in hopes of completing his research and finding a cure for Delta Fever. In contrast to Fen's hyperalertness and competence, Daniel is completely out of his element and wholly unprepared for the grim reality of Orleans. I love that when he and Fen do team up, it is out of necessity and again that desperate need to survive. Together, they form a new kind of tribe.

And then there's that important theme of hope – because as dark as *Orleans* gets, there are these embers of hope throughout. You see it in Daniel's first glimpse of the Superdome, with the countless hours of work the Ursuline sisters have put into preserving the bones of the tens of thousands dead. It's there when Fen chooses to hold on to her friend's baby girl and not abandon her to the blood-hungry dogs and men chasing them. And you better believe it's there when Fen makes a desperate last gamble to get the child over the wall, damn the cost to herself.

I say again: I loved this book. It is dark and gritty, and it might not be for everyone, but for me? *Orleans* is damn near perfect, and in the running for one of my top 10 reads of the year.

Rating: 9 – Damn Near Perfection



September Girls by Bennett Madison: Not A Sexist Book

By Ana | Originally Posted 6/20/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/06/september-girls-by-bennett-madison-not-a-sexist-book.html

September Girls flew completely under my radar – not much of a mermaid fan here – until the reviews started rolling in. And that was when I became REALLY interested in the book because the reactions to the book are so divisive. I read the first negative from fellow bloggers at Cuddlebuggery who thought the book was terribly sexist and anti-feminist, and then lots of others Goodreaders followed suit with the same reaction. Then I noticed *September Girls* received starred reviews from Publishers Weekly and Kirkus. It had blurbs from E. Lockhart, Sara Zarr and Nova Ren Suma – all writers who write awesome books with awesome girls. Heck, E. Lockhart's *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* is the apex of feminist YA. Forever YA loved it and Kelly Jensen from Stacked called it a feminist read.

Needless to say, I had to see for myself.

And I am SO glad I did. My own take? I love it. I agree with those who say this is a feminist book. I think *September Girls* is not only NOT sexist, but also quite the opposite: I think it challenges sexism in myriad ways directly and metaphorically. It questions patriarchy, the idea of "manhood" very explicitly and it does so in a beautifully written, languid, thought-provoking story. It's absolutely one of my favourite reads this year.

Allow me to expound on why. Please note: I am hoping it is clear that I am not attacking different readings of *September Girls*. I feel I need to interact directly with some of the sexism claims because, to me, it is important to offer a different take. So, here is my deconstruction of the novel and, most importantly, of the claims of sexism levelled at it.

WARNING: ALL THE SPOILERS.

The story is mostly narrated by Sam, a young 17-year-old boy who is spending his summer with his father and brother Jeff at a remote beach house in a sleepy location full of strange, beautiful Girls. Sam addresses them with the capital G because they are so *other*: all equally blond, all equally weird, all beautiful, extremely sexy and – unexpectedly – coming on to him. When he meets DeeDee, one of the Girls, they start to fall for each other. Then he learns what the Girls really are.

September Girls is a dark, twisted, fucked-up fairytale in which mermaids (or beings that are very similar to mermaids) have been cursed by their Father. Sam shares the narrative with one of the Girls who is telling him – us – everything about them in this eerie, amazing tale. It's almost like a siren song.

We are told: the Girls' father curses them because he hated their Mother, who is called a Whore:

> "*We have been told that she was a whore, although we can't remember who told us that, and we often find ourselves arguing over the true definition of* **whore**."

We are told: the curse entails being sent away from home abruptly and with very vague memories of why and how. They show up at the shore one day, naked and barely formed. They can't swim. Their feet hurt with every step. They don't know how to speak, what to think and they don't even remember their names:

> "*We come here without names. There are the names they call us. But those aren't our names.*
>
> *The names they call us are not hard to guess. Comehere, Wheresmyfood, Trysmilingsometime, and Suckonthis are four common ones, but the list goes predictably on from there and only gets uglier.*
>
> *Those are the names they call us. Those are not our names. We choose our own names.*"

We are told: they have no identity or memory but they know that to break the curse they need to find a good, virgin boy to have sex with and so they must *forge* their identify in the way that will work best for them in attracting those boys. They forge it by the most immediate things they see in front of them: fashion magazines and TV shows and thus they realise that becoming sexy, blond girls will give them the best chance to break the curse:

> "*We crawl onto land naked. We learn which clothes to wear. We learn how to do our makeup, how to style our hair. How to toss it with sexiness that appears unconsidered. The women think we're tacky, but we're not interested in the opinions of women anymore. We learned long ago how unimportant the opinions of women are. We are here because our mother could not protect us. We are here because our father had an 'opinion.'*"

We are told: when they finally find a Virgin boy, their curse does not allow them to act – they must always wait for the guy to notice them. Only when the curse is broken can they return to their elusive home. They are all sisters but sisterhood is dangerous.

And it's all horrible and unfair and just like Sam says at one point: these Girls' parents are real fucking assholes.

A possible reading is to take those quotes and the curse itself at face value – they do sound incredibly misogynistic. That's because *they are*. That is in fact, *the point*. If that curse and those quotes I chose are not a brilliant, REALLY OBVIOUS metaphor for how girls experience sexism in our society as well as an example of the weight of unfair expectations bearing on them, I don't know anything anymore.

In a way, I think the best criticism that could be levelled at the book is that at the end of the day, this could still be construed as a book that shows female suffering as a means to talk about feminism. And given that the way to break a curse is to have sex with a virgin boy, this could still be construed as a book that puts a lot of power on the hands of the *male*. That said, with regards to the former, ours is a world in which women do experience sexism every single day. Even though I love to see diverse stories in which misogyny isn't perpetuated, I also want to see stories that acknowledge this fact, that acknowledge the wtfuckery of fairytales and of ridiculous curses. Above all, I want to read stories like *this one*, which accomplishes all of the above while so cleverly addressing sexism and patriarchy.

My reading is that the Girls' curse is a mirror. It is a mirror reflecting our world – but in many ways it is also a broken mirror because the question is always there. It's in the way that the Girls DO form

friendships with each other. It's in the way that the Girls DO try to break the curse by attempting to leave the beach and the town (Girls have almost died trying). There are those who challenge the rules, and those who simply accept their deaths without breaking the curse. And it's not even a heteronormative story either: Girls have fallen in love with other Girls as well. This book would be a bad, sexist idea if the sexism wasn't challenged at every step of the text, if the Girls' Father wasn't presented as a raging misogynist who is worthy of contempt.

Reading is such an awesome thing, and as I said, my aim is not to discredit other people's readings of the book. I truly find the ways that readers have interacted with *September Girls* fascinating. There is, for example, a passage that has been quoted in several reviews and used to support the claims of misogyny and sexism and slut shaming. I wanted to quote it here to as support exactly the opposite. In it DeeDee and Sam are chatting after her reading of the Bible:

> *"I like the parts about hos, even if they always come to a bad end. Eat a fucking apple, you're a ho. Open a box, you're a ho. Some guy looks at you: turn to stone, ho. See you later, ho. It's always the same. The best one is Lilith–also a ho, but a different kind of ho. She went and got her own little thing going, and for that she gets to be an eternal demon queen, lucky her. No one likes a ho. Except when they do, which, obviously, is most of the time. Doesn't make a difference; she always gets hers eventually."*

To me this passage is incredibly subversive and sarcastic. It shows that DeeDee is fully *aware*. To support my claim of awareness, she even says a bit later on: **"I actually like hos myself. Maybe I am one – I barely know what counts anymore."** She has read feminist tracts and understands how society works: **"I love how when boys have a completely unacceptable habit like peeing in the sink, science actually goes to all the trouble to come up with a justification for it."** Or when Sam "congratulates" her for having opinions, she says: **"Oh, thank you, I'm so glad you approve of me having a thought in my brain."** So to me? DeeDee = fucking awesome.

BUT even if taken at face value, even if we want to believe that DeeDee IS slut shaming in the Bible quote, it would also be ok in the *context of this novel*. Because there are Girls who do not question. There are Girls who simply go about doing what they are supposed to do. And that is also a significant way to portray internalized, unquestioned sexism – we are all part of this world after all and are all subject to sexist messages all the time. This is all the more clear in the book with regards to the Girls.

So I have written all of that and so far haven't even touched on the subject of Sam and his dick or Sam and his raging sexism and how those connect to some of the criticism I have seen with regards to the book: the language used, the continuous swearing as well as references to sex and to private parts. To wit: I understand that each reader has different thresholds for what they like to read and how much cursing they can take and *September Girls* can be seen as extremely crass in parts.

But to me, it was not really crass as much as it is straightforward and bullshit-less. To me, Sam has a healthy relationship with his dick – he calls it a dick, he likes to masturbate and he gets boners. There is this one time, he thinks to himself that all he wanted to do was to go home, relax and masturbate and go to sleep and – this is probably Too Much Information but at this point, I don't really care anymore – I TOTALLY GET THIS, BRO.

There is also this one scene in particular that a lot of readers see problems with in which he is staring at this beautiful beach, he is feeling the sun on his back, it's the first day of his summer holidays and he says something like "I felt a heaviness in my dick." I totally get how sensual moments like these are, you know? But also, this is not all that moment entails: the heaviness in his dick is because:

> *"I felt strong and solid, more myself – the best version of myself, I mean – than I had in a while."*

The contextual meaning of all of this is that Sam is learning who he is, he is searching for an identity and to an understanding of what it means to be a "man." This is a recurrent theme in the novel. This is the *main point* of the novel. As early as page ONE Sam talks about his father and brother thusly:

> *"The most obnoxious thing about them was their tendency to land on the topic of my supposedly impeding manhood: that it was time to* **be a man, or man up**, *or* **act like a man**, *et cetera, et cetera. The whole subject was creepy – which vague implications of unmentionable things involving body hair – but the most embarrassing part was basically just how meaningless it all was. As if one day you're just a normal person, and then the next – ta-da! – a* **man**, *as if someone would even notice the difference."*

For the entire book Sam is struggling with the idea of "manhood." He is directly and explicitly struggling to understand what is it that makes a boy a man. His brother Jeff and his best friend Sebastian constantly sprout deeply offensive and sexist language when talking about girls. They use gendered insults all the time (e.g. "Don't be a pussy Sam"). And Sam, even though he feels uncomfortable hearing those messages, he also uses that language and refers to girls in a demeaning way. But the more his arc progresses, the more he changes. At the onset of the book, Sam is not completely clueless because he questions the way things are (as evidenced by the quote above). Still, though he questions, Sam is not quite fully aware, so throughout the book he says horrible things and thinks sexist thoughts.

And this just brings me back to how the *narrative* does not condone this, because it constantly puts Sam's – and Jeff's – ideas in check. I like how the narrative does allow for sympathy for Sam (as well as for douchebag Jeff) as another boy struggling to break free of internalized sexism. But the point is: he grows out of it. He grows out of it beautifully by learning to respect and love the women in his life. And we are not solely talking about romantic love, either. Sam learns to understand and sympathise with his mother, he forges friendships with other Girls, and he falls in love with DeeDee. And, while love is a HUGE catalyst for change in this book, I really appreciate the way that love is not the end-all/be-all that will solve everybody's problems. Quite the opposite, in fact.

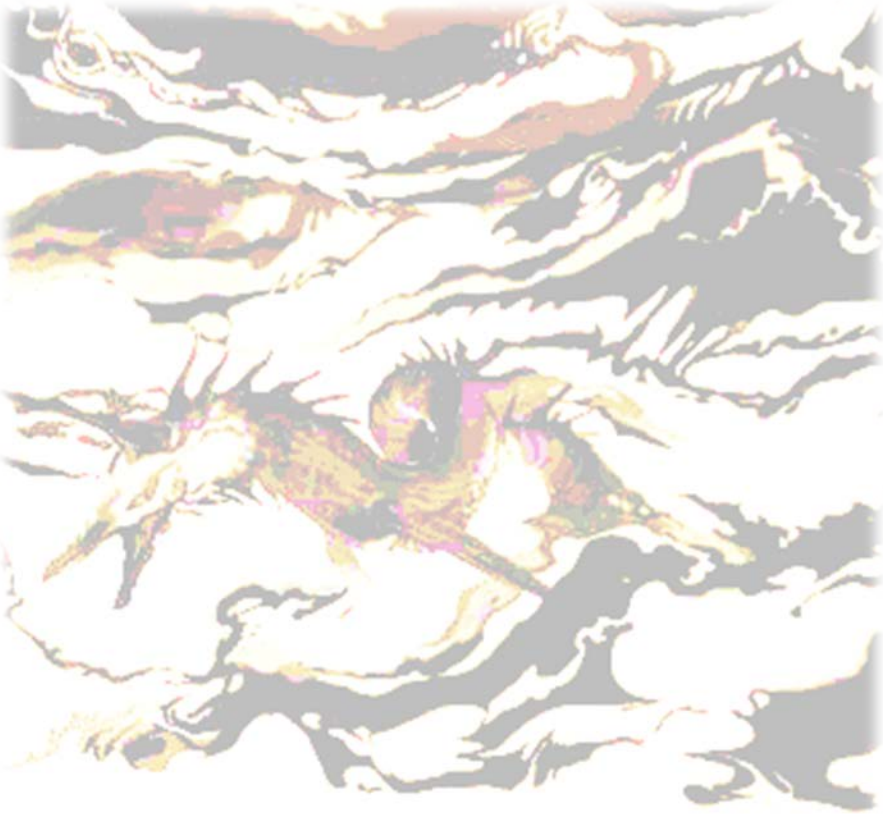
Speaking of Sam's mom, she is another brilliant aspect of the book. Her arc, in my opinion, reads as an incredibly feminist one. Sam is the one to describe what happened to his mother and he does so by being completely oblivious: he talks about how his mom one day started going online, how she became addicted to Facebook, then after reading the SCUM Manifesto she decided to take off to Women's Land to find herself. HE doesn't *understand* anything about it. HE thinks his mom is crazy and that she has destroyed his family. THEN his mother comes back and that's when his understanding of her takes place and it is beautiful: then we learn that his mother was struggling to understand her own life choices:

> *"I thought of what my father had said: about the choices she had made and the ones she was still making. She had decided to take action. Even if it had been pointless, even if it had been the wrong thing, even if it had just only led her back to us eventually, it was still action and that counted for something."*

And here is the gist of this book: it's about choices and identity in a world that often tries to take those away from both women and men. I loved DeeDee and Sam because both are trying so hard to understand themselves and the world they live in. *September Girls* offers a deeper understanding of love, identity and a constant, non-stop challenge of ideas regarding "masculinity" and "femininity."

The ending of *September Girls* is fucking brilliant. It's bittersweet and fantastic as it brings the curse to a head with a twist about choices and moving on and love. The curse does not work in the way one expects it to work and the ending is so satisfying in the way that it doesn't play into romantic expectations. Love does not save anyone. This is a fairytale but not of the Disney variety (if there was any doubt). This is a languid, slow-moving, summer-like story, and I loved it. And now I also want to read everything Bennett Madison has ever written.

It's a 9 from me and it will definitely be on my top 10 books of 2013.



Smugglivus Guest Blogger: Gender Parity and Cover Art

By Justin Landon | Originally Posted 12/13/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/12/smugglivus-2013-guest-blogger-justin-landon-of-staffers-book-review-on-gender-parity-and-cover-art.html

Welcome to Smugglivus 2013! Throughout this month, we will have daily guests – authors and bloggers alike – looking back at their favorite reads of 2013, and looking forward to events and upcoming books in 2014.

Who: Agent provocateur Justin Landon, the brilliant guy behind Staffer's Book Review (one of our fave SFF blogs), and co-editor of *Speculative Fiction 2012*.

Welcome, Justin!

Gender parity is a hot topic. Have you noticed?

The women over at Lady Business have done a tremendous job, along with our very own Book Smugglers, Foz Meadows, and a host of activist writers, bringing gender discrimination to the forefront. The fact remains we have far more men represented in certain venues than we ought to given the general 50/50 nature of the gendered world. But, it seems like it's getting better if for no other reason than we're talking about it.

So much focus has been on talking about authors that it's easy to overlook the fact that they aren't the only contributors to a final form novel. You've got the editor, the publicist, the publisher itself, and the cover artist. The first three, interesting enough, are often women. I have no data to support that, but anecdotally there's a large percentage of women in those positions. The latter, cover artist, does not seem to possess that same equality.

My inquiry on the subject began when I ran a piece on my own blog about one of my favorite artists, Richard Anderson. A few weeks later, I ran a similar piece on Jeffrey Alan Love. Given the predisposition of the blogging community to focus more on male writers than female, something I've tried to change, I felt compelled to do the same with art. Where to begin? Unfortunately, I wasn't aware of many women in the science fiction and fantasy illustration scene outside of the estimable Julie Dillon.

A typical first stop in situations like this is to check the Hugo list. Considering the only female artist I knew was the recently Hugo nominated Julie Dillon, that's exactly what I did. Turns out Dillon was the first professional female artist to be nominated for a Hugo in 27 years. Read that again. In fact, Rowena Morrill in 1986 was the previous torch holder for "The Last Woman to Be Nominated." Morrill was nominated several times previous to 1986, along with Val Lakey Lindahn. Sixty years of Hugo Awards and we're talking about three female nominees. Ever.
I feel like the kid, Squints, from the movie *The Sandlot*.

Well, we know all about those Hugos, don't we? Bunch of misogynists! Surely the Chesley Awards would be better. And they are, slightly. Over the last ten years the Chesley's nominated a woman for best hardcover illustration four times, three of which were Kinuko Y. Craft. A woman has not won in that time span. (For complainers of sample size, I just couldn't lay my hands on the history further back than 2002). They did recognize the great Julie Bell for Lifetime Achievement though in 2007, so maybe things are looking up.

Perhaps looking backward wasn't the right answer, as gender parity is a more recent conversation (tongue in cheek), I decided to order a copy of *Spectrum 20*. Spectrum is an annual volume that looks at the year's best fantastic art. Inclusion in its pages is decided by a panel of judges. This year that panel included Tim Bruckner, Irene Gallo, Tim Kirk, Mark A. Nelson, and Michael R. Whelan. The book opens with a list of Spectrum Grand Master Award winners. Nineteen in total. This year's winner is Brom. The last and only woman to win the award on her own? The aforementioned Kinuko Y. Craft. (Diane Dillon won it as part of the Leo and Diane Dillon team.) Not off to a good start. I started looking through the different categories of art in the book and here is what I found:

- Advertising: 2.5 of 20 (the half being Zelda Devon w/Kurt Huggins for "Trash Ball")
- Book: 8 of 86
- Comics: 5 of 46
- Concept: 1 of 27
- Editorial: 4 of 26 (two of the four are the same artist)
- Institutional: 15 of 79 (some repeated artists)
- Unpublished: 33 of 168 (some repeated artists)

Roughly 15% of the images in the book were drawn by women. Even in the "Unpublished" category, where it seems we should be approaching a more manageable ratio due to the fact that no one has paid for the work, we still see less than two female artists for every ten illustrations. In short, what the fuck is doing on here?

Perhaps *Spectrum 20*, the Hugo Award, and the Chesley Award were something of anomalies. Maybe, like fiction, we spend too much time honoring men, while women toil in the background with exceptional work that goes unrecognized. With that in mind, I started pinging my contacts to get some data straight from the source. How many women are working in cover illustration in SF&F?
My first call was legendary Tor Art Director, Irene Gallo. From September 2013 to August 2014 in the Tor hardcover and trade list, 90 titles had commissioned illustration (or photo-illustration). 7 were done by women. Tor.com, which does a tremendous amount of original illustration for its short fiction, uses female artists 21% of the time. My next stop was Lee Harris with Angry Robot who offered 5 female artists out of 26 titles in 2013, or roughly 25%. Lou Anders with Pyr indicated they worked with two female artists this year. Other publishers were contacted, but were unable to generate the data.

While my survey is hardly comprehensive or statistically significant, it raises some very disturbing patterns that demand further exploration.

Gallo offered the right question in our email exchange, "There are at least as many young women in art schools and workshops. Usually more, in fact. Why do so few remain ten years later?" I would amend the question to add, do fewer women remain in the field or is it merely that women in science fiction and fantasy illustration struggle to find work in book publishing? And if so, in either case, why? Like Gallo, I don't know the answers, but let's throw out some possible ones.

Women illustrators don't have a style that suits commercial genre book covers.

I struggle with this one. I'll admit, women like Victo Ngai, Lili Ibrahim, and Kali Ciesemier do perhaps have a style that precludes them from easily matching to what I might refer to as marketable SF&F. Their styles are unique and odd and amazing, but not necessarily classic in a Frank Frazetta or Michael Whelan kind of fashion. Of course, Jeffery Alan Love's work isn't exactly standard. Nor is what Joey Hi-Fi does. Not to mention Will Staehle's odd designs.

Meanwhile, Karla Ortiz, Lindsey Look, Lauren Saint-Onge, Winona Nelson, Cynthia Sheppard, Nicole Cardiff, Charlie Bowater, Elena/Hellstern, Elsa Kroese, AlectorFencer, Diane Özdamar, and Melanie Delon, to name a few, seem to fit very neatly in the commercial mold. Ortiz's style, for example, reminds me quite a bit of Jason Chan. Winona Nelson has something of Dan dos Santos in her work. Of course that's selling both Ortiz and Nelson short. They have their own beautiful style, as do all of the women I mention here. They're all doing the kind of art that's absolutely in the mold of the most prolific male artists, particularly in reference to cover illustration.

It's possible that most of the women are incredibly difficult to work with, have no time to answer publishings' phone calls, or simply refuse to leave empty space for type setting. It's possible like it's possible George R.R. Martin will release a book next year. In other words, I'm not convinced. What's definitely not possible is that these women aren't capable of doing commercial SF&F work. That's just bullshit.

In fact, Ngai was commissioned by Tor this year for *Vicious*. Ibrahim worked with 47 North for the *The Palace Job*. Ortiz produced *The Order of Deacons* for the Science Fiction Book Club. Women are finding work in the field, but at a frequency that prompts the tired phrase, 'the exception that proves the rule.'

Women are more likely to take their art to other fields, or not be freelance, or whatever else.

This is the fake geek girl argument if I ever saw one. You want me to believe that women make up the majority of the genre readership, have a huge presence on the editorial staffs of publishers everywhere, and generally let their geek flag fly in large numbers, but most of the geek artists don't want to work in the space? Uh huh. I'm not buying it. This is the platitude we use so we don't feel bad about ourselves.

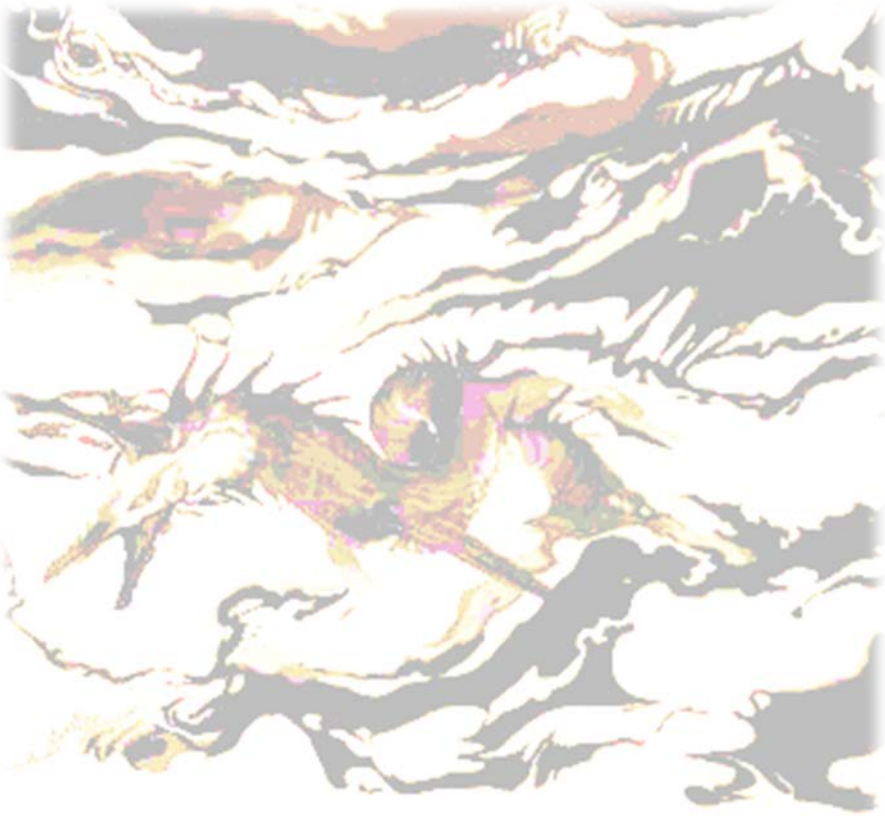
Genre fiction is inherently conservative due to investment in series, making the status quo extremely attractive.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Or at least this is much closer to the mark. Notice that I struck out a part of the assumption. Series investment is just another piece of cover (pun intended). Women aren't working in the field because Art Directors and Editorial Directors have a mission statement—sell books. Publishing goes with proven commodities. They gravitate toward what they knows they can sell. John Harris, Kekai Kotaki, Larry Rostant, Michael Komarck, John Picasio, and all the rest, have proven time and again that they can resonate with the demographic SF&F publishers have targeted for a generation.

But, I would argue that generation, *that paradigm*, is changing. Not merely by the measure that we're demanding a more representative field be offered an opportunity, but also that we're demanding more progressive work. We don't just want to read the another installment of David Weber. We want the eye opening and mind blowing *Ancillary Justice* from Ann Leckie. We don't want another Terry Goodkind regurgitating all the things we've heard a million times. We want Elizabeth Bear with her haunting prose and powerful characterizations.

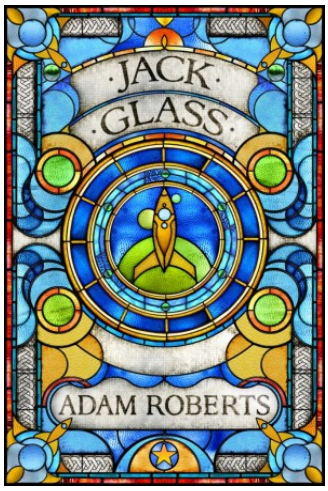
I say we, but I mean me. Call it wishful thinking. Publishing might change their patterns if we give them time. Odds are if we don't make noise no one will notice and business as usual will continue. It's not good enough for me. It's not good enough for my daughter. And I don't think it's not good enough for you.

Prove me right.



Jack Glass by Adam Roberts: An Impossible Book

By Ana | Originally Posted 7/5/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/07/jack-glass-by-adam-roberts-an-impossible-book.html



Jack Glass is an impossible book.

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I've had this on my radar ever since it came out but it wasn't until it won the British Science Fiction Award for Best Novel this year that I decided to read it.

Jack Glass is ostensibly a blend of Golden Age Science Fiction and Golden Age Crime – to which point this is a *homage* or *subversion* is up for discussion. I feel it's both.

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The opening line is one of the best opening lines I have ever read:

> *This narrative, which I hereby doctorwatson for your benefit, o reader, concerns the greatest mystery of our time.*

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It's a Science Fiction novel. Set in the far future – humanity has travelled extensively in the Solar System and spread out as far as it can go. There are trillions of us now, a minority of the super wealthy who run things and a vast majority of super poor – it's not even simply polloi anymore, it's sumpolloi – who inhabit shanty bubbles across the System with nothing but the bare minimum for subsistence. Those who are really lucky end up working for the Clans and Corporations who run everything.

It's a Crime novel. The story is divided in three interlinked parts: a prison story, a whodunit and a locked-room mystery.

Jack Glass is the murderer: we know this from the get go. There is a short – FANTASTIC – introduction that estates very clearly that whatever the crime is, he's done it. So this is clearly a HOWdunit and a WHYdunit.

In the meantime: FTL! Faster Than Light travel – an impossibility according to the Law of Physics. Something that is both the epitome of Hope (imagine being able to travel even further afield, away from this horrendous reality and start anew!) and the possible end of all mankind (because new technology = undisputed potential for violence, exploitation and escalation).

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The prison story opens the novel:

7 violent criminals are about to start their 11 year prison sentence on a far away asteroid. Their survival depends on them working together to make the asteroid habitable which is both about their survival and the point of their sentence: they are given the necessary tools to extend the one room they have been dumped on (an advanced substance locks them in and allows them some air), create new chambers, grow food after they dig and find ice. At the end of these 11 years, they go free, the corporation that dropped them there resells the now inhabitable asteroid, everybody wins.

If they can make those 11 years, that is. Because humans being humans, as soon as they are left there, a power hierarchy is established between the 7 individuals. 5 Alphas run things – the 2 at the bottom must take it. One of them is a fat whinny man who used to be a God but now is the butt of everybody's jokes. The other is a legless man (in a universe where most inhabitable places are gravity-free, why would anyone even need legs?) called Jac who has an obsession with the glass pieces he finds embedded in the asteroid.

These two become the group's the punching bag and also their sex playthings (they are regularly raped).

Needless to say: the prison story is also a locked-room mystery and to some extent a whodunit. We know something really bad is going to happen and we know that Jack Glass will do it because we have been told so. It is a case of sitting down and abiding time to see how exactly things will play out. This first part is perfectly horrible and suffocating in its unstopping violence. The violence and tension in this part could have been a huge deterrent for me to carry on reading hadn't it been for the fact that the writing! Was so good! The obvious claustrophobic environment expertly replicated in the writing itself.

It's impossible to escape this asteroid, we are told several times. But Jac *needs* to get away before the people who put him there realise who he really is.

In the end Jack does what Jack does best (the greatest criminal of all time, the biggest murderer the world has ever seen) and manages the impossible.

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Then we move to the second part: The FTL Murders! This is a typical whodunit set in a "manor house" on Earth where the extremely wealthy and privileged sisters Diana and Eva are sent by their parents to celebrate Dia's sixteenth birthday. They are the future of Clan Argent, genetically engineered to be master problem-solvers. Eva's mastery of Science and Physics is equal to Dia's mastery of virtual murder-solving. Both approach their subject in different ways – Eva is removed from any *humanity* whereas Diana's approach is more sympathetic and humanised. Not that she has had any chance to actually *be* sympathetic so far as her privilege is so deeply ingrained.

The sisters are surrounded by their bodyguards, their servants and their tutor Iago all of whom receive hormone injections that hinder their sense of individuality and amplify their love for their employers. They would never EVER be able to hurt or be disloyal to Dia and Eva.

Which is why when one the servants is mauled to death (in a locked-room no less) no suspicion is raised about the safety of the two sisters. Instead, this becomes the perfect opportunity for Dia to apply her knowledge to a Real Murder.

It is painfully obvious to surmise who Jack Glass is in this scenario. But then again the WHO has never been the point. Things are not as simple as they look and the WHYdunit of this case is quite possibly the most important thing about *Jack Glass*.

Whodunit, Locked-Room, Prison Escape (yes, this too). The second part is all three at once as well.

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It's better not to say anything about Part III – a locked-room mystery that is most definitely a whodunit (even though we know it was Jack Glass!) and a prison escape – because it completely spoils everything else. But here is where things reach their climax, overall character arcs are revealed and motivations shift one more time.

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How many times within the story we are told that things are impossible? And how many times have they been proved not to be? This is where homage meets subversion, I believe.

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It would be so easy to take this book at face value and to simply say: *Jack Glass* is a lot of fun. The author is clearly knowledgeable about the genres he is writing. The elements of Science Fiction are just super cool even if they require a LOT of suspension of disbelief (the impossibility of certain things, the outlandish conclusion to part one).

That said, to take this book at face value is doing it a huge disservice, I think. But this is also where things become not only less fun but also potentially problematic once you really think things through.

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The point is: the fundamental premise of the story and the very foundation of this cosmos are based on ideas that are so depressingly uninventive, old and downright boring to me: that humans are fundamentally bad and that things will always be shit apart from a few pointed individuals who will try to bring the Revolution to the rest of the humanity. Jack Glass and to some extent the narrative would like you to believe he is one of those (HE is not, of course. Dia is).

Basically, the universe is a prison of our own making and we are all trying to escape: the biggest locked-room/prison escape of ALL TIME .

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In part one, we are constantly faced with the worst of humanity. We ourselves are locked in the story with a bunch of characters that are so violently and abhorrent bad they are almost caricatures. If there is one thing this book is almost TERRIBLE at is in writing some of its characters – most of them are only skin-deep.

Each part uses their "mystery" as fodder to explore the make-up of this future. We come to clearly understand its economic, social and political systems which place no value on human life because there's so many of us. At the same time, Jack Glass continuously brings up the idea that there is an elemental importance and uniqueness of each human life – interestingly though he makes that point by exactly reinforcing the idea of valueless he is trying to dismantle. But that's ok: I don't really think we are to sympathise with Jack Glass at all. I know I didn't because the degree of his sociopathy is incredible as is his extremely narcissist personality (seriously, it is all about him)(which might well be The Point).

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I have to say this: some things make no sense to me.

For example:

The prison sentence on the asteroids is presented as an "elegant business model". Really? In a universe where people obviously need new places to live urgently, it is a good business model to wait ELEVEN YEARS for each new habitable asteroid? Given the evident advanced technology, I am pretty sure it would be more logical to use that than prisoners to excavate asteroids little by little.
The question of what to do with the prisoners then would only be a question to follow the very premise (people= valueless) to its logical conclusion. That this is not done sounds like a contradiction to me.

Similarly, certain ideas are info-dumped and hammered through and things are explained point-blank to Dia, a character who is supposed to be the cleverest person ever. Granted that this could be an attempt to question genetically engineered cleverness. But to be honest, I don't think this makes sense given the portrayal of said character – it became clear that things were regurgitated for the reader's benefit.

Why are people so far out in the future still doing the same shitty things , still being shitty to each other and also still talking about Shakespeare and quoting Sherlock Holmes? Are we not going to progress any more than that?

The tone of each different part changes and it is amazing how they suit the point-view narrator. I loved Dia's point of view. BUT does this even make sense from a writing perspective given it is ONE character who is narrating it to us? Shouldn't all parts sound the same?

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Diana Argent made this book. She is an *awesome* character and to me, the book is all about her. She is geeky and knows her own importance as an individualistic, privileged member of an important Clan to start with. But as her arc progresses this viewpoint changes into growth and understanding of her importance as an individual who is also a part of a larger universe, literally.

My own interpretation is thus:

Jack Glass is not the main character of this story although he is the main character of this novel (only because the person doctorwatsonning it is clearly biased).

This is the biggest gotcha of *Jack Glass*.

I am inclined to doctorwatson this novel myself and deface the cover by replacing JACK GLASS with DIANA ARGENT.

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I really just wish that Jack Glass and Diana Argent were not so SPECIAL in a universe composed of trillions of people.

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Although I had severe misgivings about the rest of the novel, the ending made it all better. It is as perfect as an ending can be because it perfectly suits the different strands of the novel and is extremely cynical as well as hopeful (which is kind of weird, I admit).

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Like I said in the beginning: *Jack Glass* is an impossible book. It is super fun and inventive but has a supremely boring foundation because it is so pessimistic. But the ending is so hopeful!

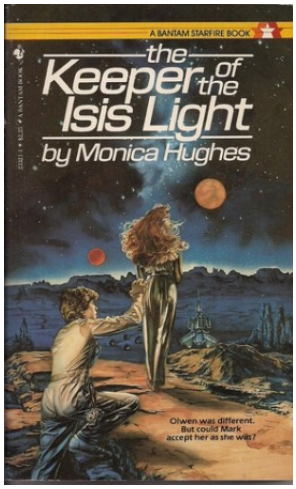
It is both a huge triumph and a big failure! At the same time!

In other words: I liked it but I also didn't. I highly recommend it: let's talk about it.

Old School Wednesdays: *Keeper of the Isis Light* by Monica Hughes

By Thea | Originally Posted 5/1/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/05/old-school-wednesdays-keeper-of-the-isis-light-by-monica-hughes.html

Old School Wednesdays *Old School Wednesdays is a weekly Book Smuggler feature. We came up with the idea towards the end of 2012, when both Ana and Thea were feeling exhausted from the never-ending inundation of New and Shiny (and often over-hyped) books. What better way to snap out of a reading fugue than to take a mini-vacation into the past?*



Genre: Science Fiction, Young Adult

Publisher: Hamish Hamilton
Publication Date: 1980
Paperback: 136 Pages (first edition)

Stand alone or series: Book 1 in the Isis Trilogy

How did I get this book: Bought

Format (e- or p-): Print Book

Why did I read this book: I recently read and loved Monica Hughes' *Invitation to the Game*, so when I spotted this (omnibus edition) at my local indie bookstore, I greedily and immediately snatched it up. A classic 1980s YA science fiction novel, from an author whose work I've already thoroughly enjoyed? YES PLEASE.

Review:

On the eve of Olwen's tenth birthday (or her sixteenth, in Earth years), things couldn't be more blissful. The sole keeper of distant planet Isis, Olwen cannot remember her parents or her past, but she wants for nothing – after all, she has a beautiful world to call her own, a loyal pet named Hobbit for companionship, and, most importantly, her beloved Guardian to help guide her in all her decisions and in her work. Olwen's role on Isis is that of the Keeper of the Light, responsible for making sure that the beacon of information about Isis leaves the planet and is beamed into the vastness of space. There, the signal from the distant second-tier planet will aid nearby supply ships and deep space travelers. On Olwen's birthday, however, the vastness of space sends back a message to the Keeper of the Light – at long last, colonists from Earth are coming to claim Isis as their new home.

The arrival of the eighty human colonists of varying ages and backgrounds is terrifying yet exhilarating for young Olwen, who has never seen another human before in her life. As the new colonists land and begin to establish their new settlements in the oxygen-heavy, radiation-protected valley (far below Olwen's home atop the mesa where she and Guardian live to tend to the Light), it becomes clear to Olwen that she is *different*. These outsiders start ruining her valley with their machines, and refuse to come up to her eyrie for fear of the thin oxygen and dangerous radiation from the light of Isis' sun, Ra. Worse, because Olwen has lived in isolation from all other humans for her entire life, Guardian makes her wear a protective suit around the colonists at all times, shielding her from dangerous microbes, but also keeping her hidden and separate. There is one colonist, however, who immediately tries to befriend Olwen – a seventeen year old (by Earth years) boy named Mark, who is fascinated by the mysterious Olwen behind her plastic shield. As the relationship between

Olwen and Mark grows, the differences between the young woman and the new colonists becomes an impossible chasm to bridge – for Olwen is far more different from her Earther brethren than anyone could ever predict.

Let me kick off this review by saying: holy crap, people. I loved this book. *I loved it*. I'm shocked that I'd never heard of this series before because it is *precisely* the kind of book I would have loved as a tween/teen, and exactly the kind of hidden gem Ana and I always hope to unearth with these Old School Wednesday reads. Books like *Keeper of the Isis Light* are the reason we have this feature! So, I'll say it again: *I loved this book*.

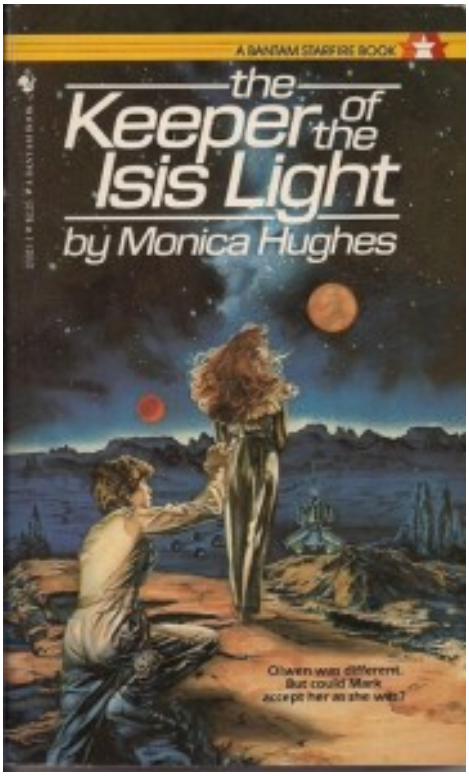
Originally published in 1980, *Keeper of the Isis Light* is traditional, eco-conscious and quietly subversive science fiction. It's of that breed of '80s and '90s YA sci-fi that reads quickly and appeals to eager young minds, while simultaneously undermining established norms. Like Jane Yolen or Lois Lowry, Christopher Pike or Bruce Coville, Vivian Van Velde or William Sleator, Monica Hughes' first Isis book has that same potent blend of nostalgic and slightly dated technology (what was cool and futuristic in the 1980s – i.e. hypno-stasis and hypnotic suggestion, in the case of this book – is not quite *en vogue* today), and timeless thought-provoking questions of humanity, choice, and identity. In this novel, we see through the eyes of Olwen, who has, as said before, wanted for nothing during all of her years on Isis. She's never lonely because she has a beautiful home, a friend in Hobbit, and love for her Guardian. Orphaned at a very young age, Olwen has never known anything else – and the catalyst of the arriving Earthers, with their old ways, prejudices, and social conditioning presents a complex puzzle for Olwen, who fundamentally cannot understand the colonists. At the same time, the colonists can hardly imagine how Olwen has survived on a planet all alone for her entire life – that is, the culture gap between the two parties is immense.

Of course, there's a larger issue that separates Olwen and her new neighbors – but therein lie spoilers. Suffice it to say that Olwen's differences extend beyond her upbringing, and the best, most potent thing about *Keeper of the Isis Light* is how it challenges ideas of humanity, prejudice and identity.

I will say that *Keeper of the Isis Light* is very much a product of its time, which is both good and bad. For example, while Olwen is defined and (to me) a wonderfully expressive heroine, the other characters in the text don't really see as much care or development (I wish we could have spent more time with Guardian, for example – but I suspect we'll see more of this particular character in the next book). On the positive side, like many of the YA SFF novels of earlier decades, *Keeper of the Isis Light* does NOT incorporate a happily ever after romance (a feature that seems to be a mandatory requirement of much of the current YA SFF wave). I love that this is actually a melancholy book, that problems aren't dissolved with an aww-shucks shrug and handshake – the prejudices and differences that divide Olwen from the colonists are not things that easily disappear, and I love and respect the sadness and reality of the book's conclusion.

In sum: I loved this book, and I cannot wait to read the next two installments in the Isis trilogy. Absolutely, wholeheartedly, and emphatically recommended – one of my notable reads of the year, hands down.

A NOTE ON THE COVERS: They are wrong. VERY VERY WRONG. I won't say why. But the only one that is even remotely correct is this one:



And that is all.

Rating: 8 – Excellent, leaning towards a 9

SFF in Conversation: Dragons, Heroes & Spaceships – Pushing Against Received Narratives

By Aliette de Bodard | Originally Posted 5/9/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/05/sff-in-conversation-aliette-de-bodard.html

SFF in Conversation is a new monthly feature on The Book Smugglers in which we invite guests to talk about a variety of topics important to speculative fiction fans, authors, and readers. Our vision is to create a safe (moderated) space for thoughtful conversation about the genre, with a special focus on inclusivity and diversity in SFF. Anyone can participate and we are welcoming emailed topic submissions from authors, bloggers, readers, and fans of all categories, age ranges, and subgenres beneath the speculative fiction umbrella.

Welcome to the inaugural post for our new series, SFF in Conversation! To kick-start the feature, we have invited Aliette de Bodard – author of the excellent *On a Red Station, Drifting* a finalist for the Hugo and Nebula Awards (which Ana reviewed recently) – talking about the roles Vietnamese and Chinese traditions play in her fiction.

Please give her a warm welcome!

Dragons, heroes and spaceships: pushing against received narratives

I grew up with dragons and heroes.

They weren't, though, the "right" kind of dragons: they did not squat, lizard-like, over a hoard of gold, or breathe fire; similarly, the heroes were not knights in shining armour, helped by archangels to slay monsters. The influential characters of my childhood came from two tattered books: a large one of Chinese fairytales, and a much smaller one of Vietnamese tales (supplemented by stories from my maternal family).[1] My dragons brought rain and Heaven's blessings; and coiled, serpent-like, at the bottom of rivers and seas, preferring pearls and jade to gold and maidens; my heroes were staunch Confucian scholars, more likely to come home to their aged mothers than to marry a princess; or crafty carpenters like Lu Ban, always ready to outwit spirits and Immortals when building them temples.

You can find Chinese and Vietnamese culture in my fiction in obvious places: in the short stories I've written ("The Dragon's Tears" on Electric Velocipede is basically my tribute to my Chinese fairytale book); and in my novella "On a Red Station, Drifting", a combination tribute to Dream of Red Mansions and the strong women of Vietnamese tradition (Confucian Vietnam is arguably a much more matriarchal society than Confucian China).

More than that, though, what I got from the stories I read as a child and from my upbringing was the idea that the ideal position in life was a sense of balance–the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean, where the ideal path through life lies in the middle between extremes–; that great passions and great love can be as destructive as great hatred; and of course that family and ancestors were an all-encompassing force that always came first in one's life (and the prominence of food in life, which you probably can see everywhere in my fiction!).

This is a strong part of the bedrock I build my stories on. It is at odds with the general SFF impetus–which is often one of lone adventurers striking out for themselves (what I call the "frontier/pioneer ethos")[2], of conflicts that escalate until victory is reached. It took me years to understand that even though such stories are generally not to my taste (and indeed starkly against my instincts of what a good story should read like)[3], reading an accumulation of them had cemented an "ideal" image of SF in my mind, where no story was worth anything without conflict.

In my work, I've had to push against the instinct to conform to this overall narrative (which is mainly Western, and I suspect strongly driven by colonisation tropes). It is not an easy ideal to have in one's mind for writing SFF–not when my first instincts go towards families working as a whole, and reconciliation rather than conquest; when the aliens that the main characters meet sometimes seem like transparent metaphors for the first contact between European colonisers and soon-to-be colonised locals; when the reference base for so much SFF seems to be the Anglophone West, and the people I'm meant to identify with sometimes seem more alien than the aliens themselves in their relentless drive to isolate themselves or be the absolute best at everything.

My characters are almost always part of a large familial network, even though you might only catch glimpses of it: in my Obsidian and Blood novels, the hero Acatl originally had a much larger family, but I had to remove most of them from the draft and leave them as references in order to diminish

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[1] I won't go into the complex relationship between China, Vietnam and Chinese culture and Vietnamese culture in this blog post; it's quite beyond my purpose! Suffice to say that there are huge commonalities but also huge conflicts between both.

[2] I'm aware not all SFF is like this, but there is a distinct tradition of such tales (and an especially strong one when one considers the "founding texts" of SFF, the merits of which are still being extolled today).

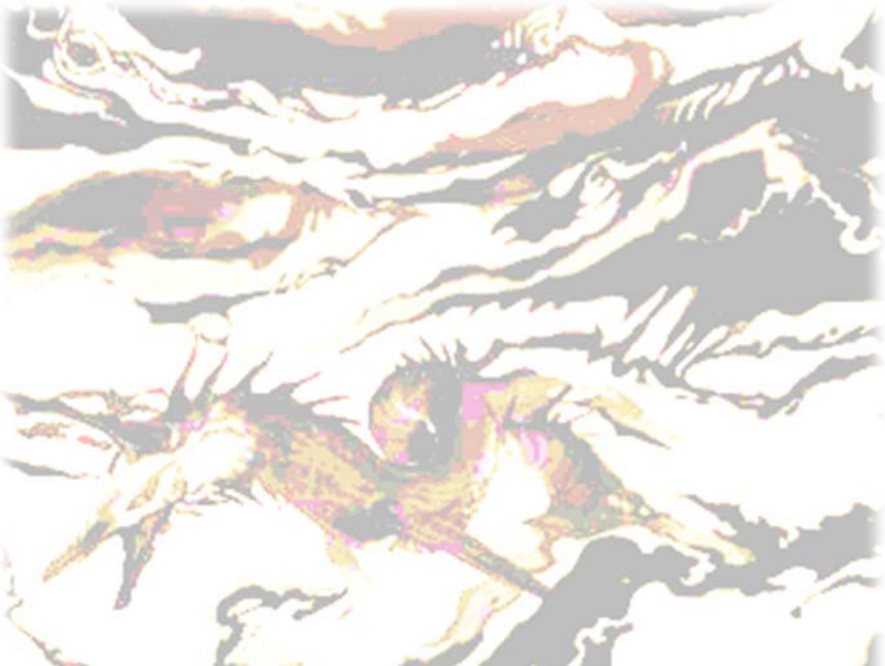
[3] A highly subjective notion, of course!

reader confusion (now that I am a better writer, I'm almost sure I could diminish reader confusion and keep the extended family in...). In my latest Clarkesworld story, "The Weight of a Blessing" the extended family is notable for their absence, and the emptiness they leave behind them–they serve to highlight the crippling sense of loss experienced by the main character, and the transition from a society based on community to a more individual one. Similarly, in my stories, people seldom resort to violence except as a choice of last resort ("On a Red Station, Drifting", though it has plenty of resentment simmering within the family, has no physical violence and the only weapons on display belong to the local equivalent of the police force–who never use them). And, always, my pieces are drenched in a strong sense of place and culture–because it's the myriad little and large things that we grow up with that end up forming the basis for our oh-so-different ways of seeing the world.

(with thanks to Deepa D.'s post, "I didn't dream of dragons", from which I stole the idea for the first sentence)

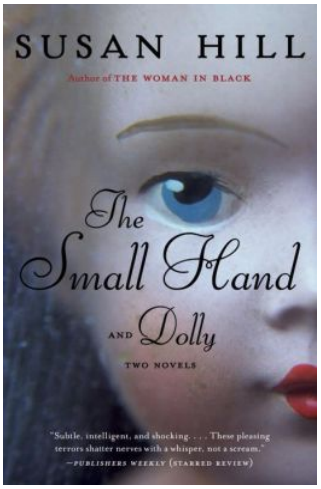
Aliette de Bodard lives and works in Paris, where she has a day job as a System Engineer. In her spare time, she writes speculative fiction: her stories have appeared in Interzone, Clarkesworld Magazine and the Year's Best Science Fiction. Her Aztec noir series is published by Angry Robot, and her novella On a Red Station, Drifting, out from Immersion Press, is a finalist for the Hugo and Nebula Awards.

Visit http://www.aliettedebodard.com for more information.



Halloween Week Review: *The Small Hand* and *Dolly* by Susan Hill

By Thea & Ana | Originally Posted 10/25/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/10/susan-hill-double-feature-the-small-hand-dolly.html



Genre: Horror
Publisher: Vintage
Publication Date: September 2013
Paperback: 288 Pages

Stand alone or series: Stand alone novels

How did we get this book: Bought + ARC from the publisher

Format (e- or p-): Print Book

Why did we read this book: Ever since Thea discovered Susan Hill's *The Woman In Black* (and made Ana read the book, too), we've been fans. When we were approached with a review opportunity for this book, a bind-up of two of Hill's previously published novels, we were thrilled (and, quite sanely, a bit terrified).

The Small Hand

Ana's Take: Adam Snow is an antiquarian book dealer who is driving back from a visit to a client when he gets lost on the road and stumbles across an old Edwardian mansion, locally known as The White House. Hoping to find help, he walks over but the house is derelict, empty. Still, overcome with a strange sense of curiosity he lingers and it is then that a small hand creeps into his own, resting there like that of a child holding his father's hand. But Adam is not a father and the hand is invisible. At first, he feels that encounter to be a benign one but in the ensuing weeks further encounters with the small hand grow increasingly malign. Adam wonders if he is being haunted or is he growing mad, the memory his brother's mental breakdown a few years back still vivid in his mind. Plagued by nightmares and a sense of a malevolent presence, he is driven to investigate the history of The White House.

The Small Hand is a creepy, atmospheric ghost story that is both utterly familiar and terrifying; the latter made possible exactly because of the former. The elements of familiarity are there for the taking: a derelict house, a sense of atmosphere created by the presence of old books, old stories and a build-up of tension that relies a lot on foreshadowing. In this case familiarity works and those elements are woven expertly in the story to exploit our sense of "we know what is happening" and to lure the reader into a sense of false safety that is overturned by the time the ending comes.

The story reads like a very old-fashioned, timeless tale and certain elements like the old house, the old books, and the main character's profession are almost enough to make me us forget that this is a modern, contemporary setting.

It is a very impacting, effectively scary story but one that is also strangely cold: Adam's narrative is strangely disconnected and distanced and any sense of horror he might have felt don't seep into the narrative. Again, this brings me back to the effect that "familiarity" has in stories like this: I wasn't scared because Adam was. I was scared because I understood, based on previous experience, what was happening. Perhaps his coldness when recounting these events are part of makes this book a successful ghost story – at least for me?

Thea's Take: *The Small Hand* is only the second story I've read from Susan Hill, and, I think this colors my expectation of her books and her writing. Both are narrated in the first person, both rely very heavily on a traditional atmospheric mounting-tension type of horror, and both have abrupt, terrifying – simultaneously shocking yet inevitable – ends.

But I am getting ahead of myself. First and foremost, *The Small Hand* is a proper ghost story (in fact, it combines two classic tropes: the vengeful ghost, and the terrifying child figure). It's a story about an introverted antique book procurer named Adam, who mistakenly stumbles upon a derelict house and a malevolent spirit – Adam fears that he is losing his grip on sanity, as the small ghostly hand of an invisible child increases its hold on Adam. It's also a story about loss, and memory, and – most chilling of all – secrets long buried.

Stylistically, *The Small Hand* is an effectively creepy book. Who would not be scared of feeling a cold little ghost hand slip into one's own, pulling one towards a watery grave? Who would not wake in terror in the night at the prospect of such a persistent, senseless terror? Susan Hill is the master of this brand of atmosphere, of spinning dread and tension and fear into a web of claustrophobic terror. What's so effective about *The Small Hand* (and, to a greater extent *The Woman in Black*) is how *quiet* this tension is. How unobtrusive, how banal.

Gradually and with great skill, the history of the White House, the mystery of the small hand's owner, and the unique ties this story has to the narrator's childhood are beautifully and effectively revealed over the course of this short novel. It's with the deepest dread that I turned the last page of this story because, instinctively, *I knew* that something awful would be waiting there, some dreadful revelation that would explain the small hand's singular purpose.

And while that revelation is predictable, it is incredibly horrific and effective. (Even if you know the scare is coming around that corner, it doesn't stop the scare from being scary.) That is the mark of a great storyteller – a great horror storyteller, to boot.

Rating:

Ana: 7 – Very Good

Thea: 7 – Very Good

Dolly

Ana's Take: Edward Carey is back to Iyot House, years after the summer he spent there as a child in the company of his Aunt Kestrel and cousin Leonora. He has vague memories of what happened there that one summer and it's the sound of shuffling and muffled crying that jogs his memories and makes him remember.

He remembers that summer years ago when he was a quiet, orphaned boy sent away to Aunt Kestrel's house. He remembers meeting the spoiled, spiteful Leonora. He remembers her birthday wish for a beautiful doll and her reaction when she didn't get what she wanted. Is it possible that they are all still living the repercussions of that one summer wish? It is interesting how *Dolly* follows a similar pattern to that in *The Small Hand* with lots of familiar elements, tons of foreshadowing and the unspoken presence of a mysterious evil but in this case where was something about it that didn't quite make it work as well. Perhaps it is the reek of misogyny that runs through the underbelly of this story. Edward's narration leads the story on for most part, apart from a few scenes from Aunt's Kestrel's viewpoint which adds a lot of backstory about her two sisters, Leonora's and Edward's mothers. The depiction of Leonora as well as her mother underscore a lot of the "evil" in this story. Edward is portrayed as a meek, sensitive child whose mother was the ugly one in the family. She dies when he was really small then he is brought up by a distant relative. Everybody just "knows" he is going to do just fine in his life.

Leonora, on the other hand, is depicted as a spiteful, spoiled, loud and *beautiful* girl who everybody just "knows" will grow up to be just like her spoiled, loud, *beautiful* mother and to have multiple husbands and lovers. Both Leonora and her mother's malevolence are connected to how they *look*. It's a recurring theme and Leonora's childish tantrum when she is *nine* is believed to be the source of characters' problems in the future.

I'd love to think that the story is actually doing something interesting with the discussion of nature vs nurture and with the way that we perceive strong, independent women. Or how Leonora's behaviour could be directly linked to how she is brought up and how people's perception of female beauty as a source of evil can effectively ruin lives. But in my opinion, this is giving the book too much credit: because both Edward and Leonora are loveless children who are brought up by dysfunctional families and yet only Leonora and her mother grow up to be spoiled shrews who are hated by everybody. Although the ending somewhat dispels the idea that it is Leonora's *fault*, it is indeed still hinted that she got what she *deserved*.

Dolly is a puzzling story about evil and I am still trying to understand what it is that it was trying to do as it attempted to – unsuccessfully – scare me.

Thea's Take: OH I LOVE IT when Ana and I disagree.

While I completely respect and understand where Ana's interpretation of *Dolly* is coming from, I respectfully disagree.

In my opinion, of the two short novels, *Dolly* is the more memorable one; the one that sticks with you, that will haunt your dreams that will make you wonder — is that a rustling sound I hear under my bed? (That will make sense when you read the book. I promise.)

It is worth noting that *Dolly* is narrated entirely by Edward – whom Ana aptly characterizes as a meek boy and mild-mannered man. It is true that Edward is portrayed as a quiet but sensitive boy, who found happiness in Iyot House, who is attentive and thoughtful and whom all the other adult

characters think of as a boy that will do just fine in life. This is true. What is also true is that Leonora is beautiful, and seen as a spoiled, entitled, even cruel young child, prone to fits and terrors and rages. She grows into a spoiled, entitled and cruel but beatiful woman, who is still prone to fits and terrors and rages.

It is also true that the book and all of these interpretations of characters, are related by Edward in the retrospective. *Edward* is the one who sees Leonora as a spoiled, beautiful, cruel brat and jaded woman; *Edward* sees himself as being mild and meek but positively thought of by others. In my reading of the book, Edward is a little bit spiteful, perhaps even attracted to Leonora, whom he paints in a beastly way because of his own hurt feelings. I do not doubt that Leonora is entitled and even spoiled, but I think everything Edward says needs to be taken with a grain of salt – Leonora's actions at the end of the book, in particular her care of her daughter, speak to a very different character than the heartless, selfish beast Edward describes.

And then there's the matter of the dolly in the title, and the curse that seems to sit on both children. See, Leonora isn't the only one "punished" or touched by evil in this book. Edward suffers this, too. I think there's a greater evil at work in this particular novel; something more sinister attached to both of these children who grew into adults, who have children of their own. To me, this is the shortcoming of *Dolly* – that this evil, insidious *something* is not fully formed or even tangentially explained.

For that reason, *Dolly* falls short of being a truly great story – too many loose ends, most notably a missing explanation or feature of the nature of the evil that has touched Leonora and Edward's lives. But for all that, it is a deeply unsettling tale, with an unreliable, biased and retrospective narrator that I found incredibly effective. The sensory aspects of *Dolly*, too, are far more terrifying in my opinion than those conjured in *The Small Hand*. The rustling of tissue paper, the quiet sobbing...

Perhaps this is the best way to put my experience reading *The Small Hand and Dolly*: of the two, *The Small Hand* is the more refined tale, but I relished in the horror and nastiness that is *Dolly*.

Rating:

Ana: 3 – Bad. Skip it.

Thea: 7 – VERY Good; and would have been an 8 (had there been a little bit more explanation)

Inheritance: Malinda Lo on (Bisexual) Love Triangles

By Malinda Lo | Originally Posted 9/24/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/09/inheritance-malinda-lo-on-bisexual-love-triangles.html

(**Spoiler Warning**: There are some spoilers in this post for *Adaptation*. I tried to write it without spoilers, but it was just too vague. So if you haven't read *Adaptation*, be warned! There are no spoilers in here for *Inheritance*.)

Love triangles are a fraught concept within the YA readership. If you google "love triangle young adult fiction," you'll find dozens of blog posts arguing over whether love triangles are good, bad, empowering, disempowering, feminist, anti-feminist, stupid, silly, or fun. Everybody has an opinion! I'm sure a few people don't care one way or another, but since they don't care, they don't blog about it.

As a reader, I understand that when a love triangle is poorly done, it can be annoying. As a writer, I think that love triangles can be useful storytelling devices, and that's part of the reason I chose to write a love triangle in my most recent two novels, *Adaptation* and its sequel, *Inheritance*, which just came out.

The love triangle in this duology, though, isn't your typical girl-torn-between-two-hot-guys love triangle. *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* are about a 17-year-old girl, Reese Holloway, who falls for two people: a guy named David Li, and a girl named Amber Gray. It's a bisexual love triangle. (It's also about government conspiracies, freaky birds, and a secret military base, but this post is about love triangles!)

I believe that sexuality exists on a spectrum, and at one end you have people who identify as 100% straight, while on the other end are people who identify as 100% gay. I believe that the majority of people fall somewhere in the middle. This is where I place the identity "bisexual," in that broad middle portion of the spectrum, and that's the perspective from which I wrote Reese's story.

I saw the love triangle in *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* as a tool to tell a very specific story about identity. The love triangle enabled me to write about bisexuality in a heightened way that I think wouldn't have worked in a realistic novel.

Why? Well, one response to the popularity of love triangles in YA is the objection that love triangles simply aren't realistic. "It wouldn't happen that way in the real world!" some folks argue. And in a way, I agree with that objection. In the real world, a love triangle is often called something else — an affair. And there are plenty of novels (many of them in the serious literary fiction genre) that deal with affairs and all their sordid, heartbreaking reality.

I believe that love triangles, in contrast, are meant to be sexy and exciting. The reader is meant to get some thrills out of it, because it's supposed to be a fantasy. A fantasy, by definition, is not supposed to

be realistic. So while I agree that love triangles aren't necessarily realistic, I don't think that's the point. I think they're supposed to be fun, heightened romance narratives.

That was one of my goals when writing *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*. There are some serious themes in these books, but I also wanted them to be fun to read. Personally, I found it pretty fun to spin a romantic fantasy about falling in love with two different but equally attractive individuals. How often does that happen in real life? Basically never. But a lot of stuff happens in these books that would never happen in real life (Or *would it*? *conspiratorial laugh*), so I think it's appropriate that the romantic plot echoes that heightened feel.

The love triangle that Reese is involved in also intersects with the greater struggle she's dealing with. As I noted, *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* are about identity, but not only sexual identity. For me, one of the central questions of these books is what makes us human.

This issue is often tackled in science fiction, which has tools to explore it in ways that realistic fiction cannot. (Realistic fiction does explore this question too, but in different ways. I wanted to use the SF tools.) Amber and David represent not only male and female, but human and not-human. I hope they also challenge that binary a bit — just as bisexuality challenges the binary between hetero and homosexual.

Reese's love triangle, therefore, is about at least two different things (I'm sure readers could come up with more). It's about falling in love with a guy and a girl at the same time, but it's also about what is human versus what is not human.

Back in 2010, author Carrie Ryan wrote a really fascinating post about love triangles, in which she argued:

> *To me, a love triangle done right isn't about a female character's affections bouncing back and forth between two men, it's about her internal struggle within herself as she figures out who *she* wants to be and what's important to her. This internal struggle then gets reflected externally as she wars within herself and grows. And that's the heart of any book — a character's growth from first page to the last.*

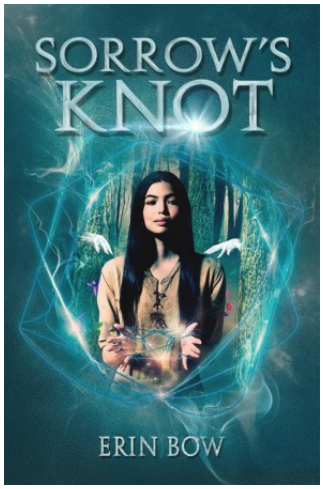
Carrie was talking about heterosexual love triangles, but I think her point is still applicable here. Reese is certainly trying to figure out who she wants to be and what's important to her — on more than one level. The question is, if Reese is bisexual, how does that romantic struggle — that choice, if it is a choice — manifest in a love triangle?

Personally, I think it can only manifest in one way because of what bisexual means. I invite you to read the books yourself to see if you agree.

Malinda Lo is the author of several young adult novels including most recently the sci-fi thriller Adaptation, which is a finalist for the 2013 Lambda Book Award and a Bank Street College Best Children's Book of 2013. Before she became a novelist, she was an economics major, an editorial assistant, a graduate student, and an entertainment reporter. She lives in Northern California with her partner and their dog.

Joint Review: *Sorrow's Knot* by Erin Bow

By Thea & Ana | Originally Posted 10/21/2013
http://thebooksmugglers.com/2013/10/joint-review-sorrows-knot-by-erin-bow.html



Genre: Fantasy, Horror, Young Adult

Publisher: Arthur A. Levine Books
Publication Date: October 2013
Hardcover: 352 Pages

Stand alone or series: Stand alone (with potential for a series?)

How did we get this book: ARC from the Publisher at BEA

Format (e- or p-): Print

Why did we read this book: Both of us read and thoroughly enjoyed *Plain Kate*, Erin Bow's first novel, and were on tenterhooks for her second book. When we were invited to participate in the blog tour for *Sorrow's Knot*, we were thrilled.

Thea's Take:

In the depths of the forest at the edge of the world, the Shadowed People make their home. Here, the darkness hides death itself – monsters of shade whose touch can kill the living. The slip are formless creatures of darkness, driven by hunger but possessing no other will of their own. The gast are stronger and more cunning, with definite form; they are rarer than the slip, but far more deadly. The most fearful of all the monsters in the sunless woods, more terrible than slips and gasts, are the Ones with the White Hands. The touch of a White Hand means not only death for the bearer, but madness and unimaginable pain – a touch that transforms, turning those touched by a White Hand into a White Hand themselves.

Otter is one of these brave Shadowed People of Westmost, who make their home in the dark forest, who repel death and keep the monsters at bay with knots of yarn and magic. Otter is the only child of Willow, the greatest binder that her kind have ever seen since Mad Spider – she who built the first great ward, and defeated the first White Hands. Like her mother, Otter has a gift for knots and binds and has always dreamed of following in Willow's footsteps, to become a great binder for Westmost.

But all of that changes when the town's old binder Tamarack, she who taught Willow all she knew, dies. Driven mad by grief – or by some other nefarious force – Willow binds her teacher in the traditional way, high in burial trees outside the village's wards. She speaks the traditional words and makes the traditional knots of death... but instead of wishing Tamarack's soul free, Willow calls it back, dooming the village to see Tamarack return as a vengeful White Hand.

Willow's act of madness leads to great heartache for the Shadowed People, and for her daughter Otter. Instead of becoming a binder and following in her mother's footsteps, Otter is cast aside without cord or profession, without hope to use her steadily growing power. And, when the White Hand comes at last for the people of Westmost, death follows in its wake – and young, untested, untrained Otter is the village's only hope for survival.

The second book from Erin Bow, *Sorrow's Knot* lives up to its haunting title and early praise. This is a beautiful, *sorrowful* book; it is an elegiac fable about death and tradition in the darkest of times. I fell in love with Bow's writing in *Plain Kate*, and I'm happy to say that the same, lush and evocative prose is present in *Sorrow's Knot* – all the more poignant, I think, in this second book because of its focus on stories and storytelling, of memory and loss. But more than the writing (which has its drawbacks, by the way – I'll get into that in a bit), it's truly the imaginative scope of this novel that makes the book so memorable.

The world of *Sorrow's Knot* is fascinating, original, and so beautifully-wrought. I love the concept of binding and binders, of magic contained in knots, and patterns that have the ability to vanquish darkness, creating wards that work on both the living and the dead. Also, very importantly, the world is thankfully neither appropriative nor exploitative (very important, as Otter's village and world is one clearly based on Native American Indians and Aboriginal people). Though rooted in these cultures, *Sorrow's Knot* is firmly a work of dark fantasy, spinning its own unique traditions and people to great effect. The pinch (village) of Westmost and the society of the Shadowed People, for example, is strictly matriarchal. Men have no magic in these woods-shrouded environs, and have only smaller roles to play in Otter's village (as such, young men born to the pinch usually leave with the annual traveling tribes that make their way from the sunny plains to the darkened woods). In addition to its matriarchal setup, *Sorrow's Knot* also creates a society in which secrets are passed down from profession to profession without ever revealing them to others in the village. Binders take on a single apprentice, and pass the great mysteries of power and secrets from teacher to student over the generations. This is important – the isolated, insular culture of secrets and lack of collaboration – and plays a vital role in the development of the story.

Of course, far more interesting than these societal dynamics are the horrific elements of the story – because truly, *Sorrow's Knot* is a dark fantastical horror novel at its core. The concept of dead shadows stalking the living is incredibly frightening, and the Ones with White Hands are flat-out *terrifying*. This book actually reminds me very much of a zombie story (it has touches of Carrie Ryan's *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* in style, substance, and sorrow) – Erin Bow mentions *The Walking Dead* in her guest post today, and that is a very apt comparison. Like a world overrun by the flesh-eating undead, the world outside the Shadowed Peoples' wards are full of death and horror, and even those wards can fail. In other words, there is no safe quarter – and this, to me, is terrifying.

Now, while so much of the book is so masterfully done, there are also certain drawbacks that prevent *Sorrow's Knot* from being a truly perfect read. As I've mentioned before, Erin Bow's writing is beautiful and evocative, and I appreciate the haunting, atmospheric quality the writing itself lends to the story very much. That said, while gorgeous, the prose also tends towards the strained and repetitive, at times feeling a little forced (certain metaphors and stylistic choices were lost on me especially at the book's end). And, especially by the end of the book, it seems style is given credence over actual explanation. The story of Mad Spider is repeated no less than four times (in my ARC, I should note), as are certain phrases without ever actually resolving anything ("there is something wrong with the knots" and "the rope is rotting" immediately come to mind). While the repetition is initially very effective, it becomes something like a trick in a horror movie – a creaking door or sharp surprise that elicits a shock, but repeated one too many times to have true emotional resonance. Similarly, the book's dramatic revelation and conclusion – roughly the last 1/4 of the story – is incredibly rushed and nebulous. I've reread the ending chapters at least 3 times now and I'm not

entirely sure I *get* what happened. Simply put: it's confusing. Perhaps this is a personal failing (me being dense/not smart enough to follow along), but I am not sure how – or, more importantly, *why* – everything is resolved. There are also a number of early loose ends that I'm not convinced are resolved effectively in the book; Willow's madness and intense power before being touched, the ultimate explanation behind the White Hands and their creation/traditions of the Shadow People, how Orca got to the island in the first place (and why he's there), for example.

Speaking of Orca, let's talk characters for a second. I love the main character, Otter, and her heartbreaking (if somewhat traditional) hero's journey, growing into her power and tearing down the shroud of secrets and unwitting lies that has been woven over the eyes of her people for generations. More than just Otter, I love the trio of friendship that is the main focus for the majority of the novel. Otter and her best friends Kestrel and Cricket have been inseparable ever since they were children: Kestrel is collected and practical, the fearless and pragmatic one of the group; Cricket, Kestrel's beloved other half, is male and has no magic of his own, but is a true, fearless friend and has great power in his stories. Together, the three grow from sunflower children to young adults; together they face down the terror of death and grow strong in each others' acceptance and love.

Where things get a little shaky (for me personally), is the last-minute addition of a mysterious stranger and love interest in the book's final act. Otter and her friends are so strong, so wonderful together, that the convenient addition of another male visitor – one who immediately falls in love with Otter, and whose love Otter completely reciprocates after a few short days – feels inauthentic and pandering. It's also shockingly *convenient*, as Orca is a storyteller from another clan, and through Orca and Otter's shared love, Otter is *finally* able to solve the mystery of the knots (honestly, couldn't she have come to this conclusion on her own? WHY must there always be a love interest that spurs these revelations on?). But... your mileage may vary. I know many will probably enjoy the love story, late as it appears in the book – it simply isn't to my personal taste.

All criticisms said, I thoroughly enjoyed *Sorrow's Knot* and absolutely recommend it – especially at this precise instant, leading up to Halloween. Erin Bow is an author of wonderful skill, and I cannot wait to read what she writes next.

Ana's Take:

"*The world was bigger than she'd thought.*"

The world was bigger than she'd thought.

If there is one thing that strikes me the most about *Sorrow's Knot* it is how it takes a simple idea and does wonders with it. Written with gorgeous prose that emulates old fashioned tales (it starts: "The girl who remade the world was born in winter"), *Sorrow's Knot* is a book that spoke to me deeply as a reader. I found in it a lot to love.

It is a tale of unspeakable horror, a tale of friendship ties, a tale of strong girls, a tale where tradition meets transformation, a tale of death and a tale of love. It is also a tale of grief so great it has changed the world, or at least the world that the characters know.

It tells a timeless story: *Sorrow's Knot* is a heroine's journey as Otter learns the extent of her power and the extent of the world around her. It is also a tale of identity: Otter always thought she'd be a binder of the death, always assumed that she had a rightful place amongst the women of power in her village. When that is taken from her what is left? In a world where what you do is also who you are – a binder, storyteller, a ranger – what and who else can she be?

The world was bigger than she'd thought.

To start with, Otter's world is a small one of close relationships, limited space, even more restricted traditions and where *history* is interwoven with stories. It's funny because in a way storytelling binds more than the knots that form the centre of this society. It is also storytelling and especially the forbidden, secret stories, that become instruments of *freedom*. But only if those stories are *shared*.

Because the powerful, free women of the forest are not as free as they think themselves to be. Not when they are restricted by unshakable tradition, not when they do not question, not when ritual supersedes common sense. It is an interesting conundrum and one I am particularly fond of reading because it takes a focused, small place like Otter's village and examines its society with a closer look. Their traditional ways make up for who they are as a people but their acceptance of "this is how things have always been" is taken at face value. It takes a few generations to get to a point where "this is how things have always been" becomes "maybe they don't have to be". So part of the journey here is to have the courage to ask why are things the way they are and it's the central trio in the story – the friends Otter, Kestrel and Cricket's – that make the jump. As it is so often in stories, it is unschooled and untried youth that question and bring about change. Because they have a close bond, a trusted bond and even if they are each from a different cord (profession), they talk to each other and share the secrets they shouldn't and sometimes this brings about awful consequences. One of those reduced me to a blubbering mess of tears and grief. The central relationship between the three best friends Otter, Cricket and Kestrel is incredibly poignant and I loved Otter and Kestrel's powerful bond so much – two girls who are well-written complex female characters.

So: there is something wrong with the knots. *There is something wrong with the knots.* At first an uneasy feeling, a passing worry. But it grows: because according to tradition and to the stories there shouldn't be anything wrong with the knots. The knots are the instrument of their safety, it is unthinkable that they should be wrong. But that uneasy feeling permeates the novel, and is repeated over and over again to great effect (at least to me) because in repetition lies clarity. In repetition lies change – Otter repeats to herself that there is something wrong with the knots in order to believe it.

So. A wonderful, wonderful book whose perfection is marred solely by its too rushed conclusion. I don't necessarily think that there are loose ends because the narrative has a certain quality of legend and fable to it and things *are* kind of vague. It suited me and I was happy with the explanations the way they were presented. I was less happy with the fact that it all seemed to happen so fast almost in discord with the rest of the novel which up until then had a more leisured feel to it.

With regards to Orca, the book could still have worked perfectly without this added component, with the focus on the relationship between the two girls remaining till the end. But from a narrative perspective I completely understand why he was introduced at all: because the world *was* bigger than Otter had thought. The relationship that develops between him and Otter is sudden and instantaneous but not completely implausible to me given the circumstances. I *liked* how things

ended between them and I liked the type of romance that developed. It is just my type of romantic relationship: respectful, fun, funny and sweet.

Sorrow's Knot has the same type of evocative poignancy that the author's *Plain Kate* had but worked so much better for me. It also reminded me a lot of two of my favourite books, *Chime* and *The Folk Keeper* by Franny Billingsley, and this is a comparison I do not make lightly.

The world was bigger than she'd thought.

And so it was.

Rating:

Ana: 8 – Excellent, leaning toward 9 and a Notable Read of 2013 (at the very least)

Thea: 7 – Very Good