



The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms

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In her cultural history of science fiction feminisms, Dr. Merrick explores the stories told about feminist science fiction by the various communities responsible for creating feminist sf culture, including authors, editors, fans, and scholars from across the disciplines. *The Secret Feminist Cabal* will appeal to every member of the feminist sf community, to fans and critics interested in the history of the science fiction genre, and to anyone interested in the production of feminist culture, history, and theory.

The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms Details

Date : Published December 1st 2009 by Aqueduct Press (first published 2009)

ISBN : 9781933500331

Author : Helen Merrick

Format : Paperback 343 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Feminism, History

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From Reader Review The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms for online ebook

Andi C Buchanan says

Well written, well researched and in places very interesting book, but overall I found I didn't quite get as much out of it as the effort I had to put in to reading it.

Anna "Andi" says

Well written, well researched and in places very interesting book, but overall I found I didn't quite get as much out of it as the effort I had to put in to reading it.

Lauredhel says

Fabulous!

Cathy Green says

Before beginning my review proper of Helen Merrick's *The Secret Feminist Cabal – A Cultural History Of Science Fiction Feminisms*, I thought it might be useful to those reading the review and trying to decide whether it is helpful if I described what I believe to be relevant background information about myself. Since graduating from college and law school more years ago than I care to think about, I have not had a great deal of contact with scholarly works or book length literary criticism, although I think some of the work I read in college as an art history major and more especially the work I read in the legal theory class I was required to take as a 1L (particularly the writing of scholars such as Martha Fineman, Patricia Williams and Kimberlee Crenshaw) gave me a background comfort level when reading Merrick's book. This is not to say that the work is particularly opaque to those without graduate degrees, but that I think it gave me a certain comfort level when it came to some of the more scholarly/academic sections of *The Secret Feminist Cabal*. Of course, my post-secondary school education was long enough ago and most of my non work-relating reading limited to popular fiction, that I can fairly be described as approaching the subject matter of the book in a state of some ignorance other than my personal experiences as a reader of science fiction and an attendee of both literary and media SF conventions.

Merrick divides her book into eight chapters: (1) Introduction: The Genre Feminism Doesn't See; (2) Resistance is Useless? The Sex/Woman/Feminist "Invasion"; (3) Mother of the Revolution: Femmefans Unite!; (4) Birth of a Subgenre: Feminist SF and its Criticism; (5) FIAWOL: The Making of Fannish Feminisms; (6) Cyborg Theorists: Feminist SF Criticism Meets Cultural Studies; (7) Another Science "Fiction?" Feminist Stories of Science; and (8) Beyond Gender? 21st Century SF Feminisms.

As indicated by the chapter headings, Merrick examines the development and history of feminist SF from a number of perspectives. Because the book is focused of the question of what is feminist science fiction and more specifically, the criticism/analysis/treatment thereof, what is being provided is not an analysis of

specific SF stories. Rather, Merrick is in dialog with other criticisms and analyses of SF, particularly those she deems to be feminist or to be responding to feminist criticism. As a result, the focus of the book is not "why that story and that time"; instead Merrick seeks to address the issue of "why that particular interpretation/reaction to that story at that particular time". This is of course, a bit of an oversimplification of what Merrick is doing, especially since she is working with more than half a century of science fiction and science fiction fandom.

What should especially interest fannish SF readers who read this book is that Merrick does not stay within the groves of academe. In addition to more scholarly works, Merrick devotes extensive space to analysis of what was going on in APAs, fanzines, and at conventions. For instance, the evolution of Wiscon and the development of the Tiptree Award receive close attention. The fannish and more scholarly chapters balance each other out to some degree. So readers who blanch at the thought of ploughing through "academic speak" such as "....my analysis necessarily becomes more synchronic and dialogic...." will feel more comfortable in chapters such as "FIAWOL: The Making of Fannish Feminisms" where Merrick's language is less academic and more mundane (in the non-fannish sense of the word).

Merrick also addresses the not insignificant problem of the tendency of literary and academic criticism to neglect and/or be dismissive of genre fiction. This probably contributed to her looking outside academe to genre magazine letter columns, APAs, zines and introductions to books and story collections for source material in developing her history of the evolution of feminist science fiction communities. And given the nature of science fiction fannish activity and non-media SF conventions, science fiction as a genre is probably more actively involved with its readers and fans than any other. Of particular interest to me was Merrick's analysis of the evolution of various female science fiction writers' critical views of their own novels and those of their fellow pros, such as the reaction to Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover Landfall* by writers such as Vonda McIntyre, Kate Wilhelm, and Joanna Russ. Merrick's analysis of Bradley's shifting views on her own life and writing in the larger context of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s was fascinating. And while the Sixties and Seventies were certainly an exciting time for feminism, Merrick does not neglect the First Fandom era either and addresses how the difference in societal expectations for boys and girls, men and women in the 1930s to 1950s would have affected how girls and women would have participated in fandom, and on the pro side, Connie Willis's editorial "The Women SF Doesn't See" in the October 1992 issue of *Asimov's* receives attention from Merrick as well.

There should be no concern about not having enough background information to appreciate fully the points Merrick is making – Merrick has heavily footnoted her text and supplied an extensive (approximately 40 pages) bibliography. Similarly, if you managed to miss the cyberpunk movement while it was happening Merrick makes mention of numerous significant titles in the subgenre such as Pat Cadigan's *Synners* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. In sum, *The Secret Feminist Cabal* has something for everyone. Genre critics, academics, and fans will all find the book worth adding to their libraries.

S.B. Wright says

Review to come

Sineala says

Dense, but still an interesting overview of SF and feminism; I was hoping it would tell me about some formative texts I'd missed, but alas, I think I've heard of (and generally read) most of the names that came up.

Kirstyn McDermott says

Excellent scholarly overview and theoretical discussion of SF and SF fandom over the past century or so from a feminist standpoint. Very crunchy indeed. Will have to re-read this again soon to absorb everything more fully.

Highly recommended for anyone interested in feminist literary theory -- warning, the book is not a pop "Feminism 101" text and does require active brainpower while reading; this is *never* a bad thing -- or seeking an alternate history of science fiction.

Jet says

The research is thorough and some of the chapters excellent, but the writing overall is far too academic to be readable. For myself as a non-academic reader, it was slow and painful going with bursts of brilliance.

The chapter dealing with cyberpunk was a standout and the whole book worth reading just for that. I also enjoyed the tracing of fannish history through the years.

Shel says

As someone who wrote part of her graduate thesis on feminist literary utopias, I loved this book. It joins and chronicles the conversation about feminist science fiction. I found it irresistible, and picked it up at WisCon 35, the feminist science fiction convention. Published by Seattle's feminist sf Aqueduct Press, the book is on the 2010 Tiptree Award Honor List. As well as a good read, I admit it is also sheer fun carrying around a book titled *The Secret Feminist Cabal*.

The book pairs well with Justine Larbalestier's *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* and *Daughters of the Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (both on my bookshelves and highly recommended) and Pamela Sargent's *Women of Wonder* anthologies (on my wish list). It also points to Aqueduct Press and Tachyon Publications for more fantastic feminist sf reading.

I most enjoyed the chapters: "Birth of a Sub-Genre: Feminist SF and its Criticism" (about the emergence of the writing and including a discussion of utopias); "Another Science "Fiction"?: Feminist Stories of Science" (about women in science); and "Beyond Gender? Twenty-First Century SF Feminisms" (which includes discussion of the Tiptree Award, its judging process, and its texts).

It includes discussion of some of my favorite books including Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite*, Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* (formerly *Xenogenesis* trilogy); and Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean* as well as *The Carhullan Army* (which I just read with Seattle's Feminist Science Fiction Book Club).

I already had a long feminist science fiction reading list, but after reading this I also added Sheila Finch's *Triad*, Judith Moffet's *The Ragged World*, and Theodore Roszak's *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*. And I moved Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*, and Gwyneth

Jones' *Life* to the top of my to-read list.

Comments:

I noted how in her critique, Merrick points out that WisCon is not a "utopian feminist space" with regard to some of the short fallings of the genre and conversation particularly with regard to race. As a newcomer, I described my own my first WisCon as rather utopian Why WisCon? A Quest: Utopia Found!.

Merrick raises the discussion of whether the Tiptree Award is still needed to raise awareness of women's writing and feminist contributions to the field — Are women more well known and accepted in the field making this special recognition unnecessary? My own answer is an emphatic, "Yes, it's still needed." Even as an avid reader, as a young woman growing up in a small town, it took me a long time to find the reading I connected to and this conversation. The award helped. Also, it brings attention to more challenging and interesting texts which might otherwise be overlooked.

Quotes:

"Inspired by the transformative visions of the 1970s utopias...feminism was meant to transform sf and its future visions," - Helen Merrick, *The Secret Feminist Cabal*

"...'the language of love' that 'current science lacks and a utopian science would discover'" — Hilary Rose

"A feminist science will acknowledge subjectivity in its methods; it will look at problems not just analytically but also holistically; it will aim for the complex answer as best and most honest; and it will be decentralized and organized cooperatively. In all these ways, a feminist science is utopian, since these conditions, values, and goals do not describe contemporary science." — Jane Donawerth

"alternatives to sex role stereotyping are central to the utopian visions of feminist writers" — Pamela J. Annas

"Science fiction may be a place where feminists go to dream of utopia or plot revolution but it is also a source of pleasure." — Helen Merrick, *The Secret Feminist Cabal*

"It is the utopian mode of thinking that separates science fiction from the other categories of popular feminist fiction..." — Carolyn Heilbrun

Maggie Gordon says

The Secret Feminist Cabal is a very dense and thorough exploration of the history and development of science fiction and feminism. The focus of the work is largely on people, not fiction. While books and short stories are discussed, much of the book looks at who was important and why during different eras of history. Merrick does into great detail about not just important authors, but fans and theorists as well. She weaves structure into what seems like a complicated mess of events, showing readers how and why feminism developed in the science fiction community the way that it did, from the early 1930s up until contemporary times.

My biggest criticism of the book is that I would have preferred a bit more attention to the actual works done by the various authors and authorities that Merrick referenced. However, I don't think this text was meant to be an introductory one, and I suspect if one is more knowledgeable about the field that my issues with not

necessarily knowing the ins and outs of certain pieces would not be a problem. The text is also a little dry at times. Given the sheer breadth of material that Merrick is covering, it's hard to craft a narrative out of the history, so the average reader might find this book a bit hard to get through. This book is aimed towards academics though, and is an invaluable historical resource.

Sarah says

This book was really interesting and I liked the history of fandom as a whole that was included (same shit different day since the 1930s it sounds like) but the language is very dense and there are a few chapters that seemed a bit irrelevant. Sometimes the author would mention that certain things (eg race, sexuality) hadn't been taken into account by other writers but then she didn't really take them into account either.

I'd recommend it only if you're already interested in the subject.

Mills College Library says

809.3876 M5688 2009

Andrea says

Some fascinating parts - particularly the section on Marion Zimmer Bradley - but overall rather heavy going.

Norman Cook says

A comprehensive survey of the history of feminist activity within science fiction literature, this book is a bit more accessible than Farah Mendlesohn's book *On Joanna Russ* because it covers more ground and is not as rarified. Nevertheless, it's probably not of great interest to the average fan.

Lonnie says

My copy of this ebook was made available as part of the 2010 Hugo Voter's Packet as a part of my membership to the 2010 WorldCon.
