



The June 1940 cover of *Astonishing*.

**The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction:  
From the Pulps to the James Tiptree, Jr.  
Memorial Award**

by

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## Abstract

In this thesis I argue that science fiction is not a genre exclusively made up of written texts but a community or series of communities. I examine the science fiction community's engagement with questions of femininity, masculinity, sex and sexuality over the past seventy years: that is from 1926 until 1996. My examination of this engagement is centred on the battle of the sexes, the lives of James Tiptree, Jr. and the Award named in Tiptree's honour. I make connections between contemporary feminist science fiction and the earliest pulp science fiction engagements with sex and sexuality.

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## Editorial Note

Throughout this thesis I quote extensively from a variety of sources including personal correspondence, and letters and editorials from professional science fiction magazines and fanzines (amateur magazines) over an approximately seventy year period. I have not changed the lexis or grammar of any of these sources. () parentheses are original to these texts while [] parentheses are my additions.

Publication details of letters are not included in the bibliography but are given in the body of the thesis.

I make use of they as the generic pronoun throughout the thesis.

# Glossary

## ***Apa***

Amateur press association.

## ***ArmadilloCon***

The regional science fiction convention of Texas. It is held annually in Austin, Texas and has a reputation for being a sercon which attracts many pros. It also has a dance.

## ***BNF***

Big Name Fan. A well-known fan who is very active in fandom.

## ***Fan***

An active participant in science fiction fandom. The definition of what constitutes 'active participation' is varied. Some activities which would be considered to be fanactivities are attending science fiction conventions, reading and discussing science fiction, collecting science fiction, running conventions, publishing and contributing to fanzines. Many definitions distinguish fans from 'mere' readers.

## ***Fandom***

The field in which fan activities take place. Fandom is made up of fans and their productions such as fanzines and conventions.

## ***Fanzine***

An amateur magazine put together by fans.

## ***Filksinging***

The singing of science fiction songs. These songs are usually sung to well-known tunes with lyrics about fandom or science fiction stories or the like. The name is said to originate from a misprint on a convention program for 'folksinging'.

## ***Hugo Award***

The amateur or fan awards for science fiction, called officially the Science Fiction Achievement Award, are given in honour of Hugo Gernsback. They have been awarded every year at the World Science Fiction Convention since 1955. They are universally known as the Hugos. Along with the Nebula Awards the Hugos are the best known and most prestigious of the science fiction awards. The categories have fluctuated but since 1973 like the Nebula there have been four categories for fiction: best novel (over 40,000 words), best novella (17,500-40,000 words), best novelette (7,500-17,500) and short story (under 7,500 words). There is also an award for best professional editor and non-fiction book. Unlike the Nebula, the Hugo also includes awards for fan activities: best fanzine, best fan writer, best

fan artist and since 1984 best semiprozine. This last award was introduced to accommodate the increasing number of publications which are somewhere in between professional magazine and fanzine.

***James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award***

Annual award given to the best science fiction or fantasy text or texts which explore and expand gender roles. The Tiptree Award was named in memory of the late James Tiptree, Jr. who began publishing remarkably gender-bending science fiction in 1968. Tiptree was found to really be retired clinical psychologist Alice Sheldon in 1977.

***Media fandom***

Fandom devoted to television and film. Media fandom began with Star Trek fandom.

***Mundane***

Not science fictional. For example mundane fiction is all fiction other than science fiction.

***Nebula Award***

The Nebulas are an annual science fiction award which have been presented by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America since 1966. There are four awards, best novel (over 40,000 words), best novella (17,500-40,000 words), best novelette (7,500-17,500) and short story (under 7,500 words).

***Pro***

Someone professionally engaged with the field of science fiction.

***Prozine***

A professional science fiction magazine.

***Pulps***

Popular fiction magazines printed on poor quality coarse paper. They usually measured about 25cm x 18cm. The first pulp was ***Argosy*** which published a variety of fiction. There were adventure and western pulps as well as crime pulp magazines such as ***Black Mask*** where Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett were regularly published. Science fiction pulps included ***Astounding Science Fiction*** and ***Thrilling Wonder Stories***. The term is also used more broadly to refer to the quality of the fiction published.

***Sercon***

A convention devoted to serious discussion of (mostly) written science fiction. Sercons tend not to have masquerades or pay much attention to media fandom. They don't ban fun, however.

***WisCon***

The regional science fiction convention of Wisconsin. It is also the only science fiction convention primarily devoted to feminist science fiction. Held since 1977 in Madison, Wisconsin. The James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award was announced at WisCon and has been presented there on several occasions.

***World Con***

The biggest science fiction convention held annually in September. Cities bid to be able to hold it. Although it has mostly been hosted by cities in the USA it has also been held in Australia, Canada, Germany, Holland and the UK. The Hugo awards are presented at WorldCon.

***World Fantasy Con***

The annual fantasy convention. Like the WorldCon the World Fantasy Convention is held in a different city each year. It tends to attract a large number of pros and is generally considered to be a business convention with a relatively low number of fans.

# Preamble

The primary field of my thesis is science fiction. More specifically I am concerned with science fiction which is explicitly about social constructions of maleness and femaleness. I examine the 'battle of the sexes' in science fiction, between 1926 and 1973, as well as the James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award, and its formation from 1991 until 1996.

Central to my thesis are:

that social constructions of sex have always been under negotiation in science fiction

that the battle of the sexes is a clear site of this negotiation

that James Tiptree, Jr., the stories by and about Tiptree, and the award named after Tiptree are also sites of this negotiation

that Tiptree and the prize can be located as part of the battle of the sexes.

I take the term, 'the battle of the sexes', as it applies to science fiction, from Joanna Russ' 1980 article "*Amor Vincit Foeminam: The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*". Russ uses the term to refer to science fiction texts which are explicitly about the 'Sex War' between men and women and which posit as a solution to this conflict that women accept their position as subordinate to men. She discusses ten stories published in the USA between 1926 and 1973. I have also limited my discussion to this period but I have broadened my study to include texts which posit a range of other 'solutions' to the battle of the sexes including sexes that are neither male nor female but hermaphrodite.

1926 is a particularly apt starting point for my thesis as it marks the first appearance of an English language science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*. *This* magazine is frequently mythologised as the beginning point of American science fiction and therefore all science fiction.

Many of the accounts of the relations between feminism' and science fiction which appeared in the 1970s paint a picture of sf (science fiction) as a genre in which engagement with questions of sex, gender and the relations between men and women have been glaringly absent (Russ 1974; Friend 1972; Badami 1976; Wood 1978-79). More recent accounts such as those of Sarah Lefanu (1988) and Robin Roberts (1993) have complicated this picture. Roberts in particular argues that by "isolating moments of science fiction's past, we can begin to see where, why, and how feminist science fiction was formed" (Roberts 1993: 1). I demonstrate that debates and stories about women, men, sex and sexuality have been a part of science fiction since 1926.

The battle of the sexes texts, however, considerably predate 1926 and *Amazing Stories* and the concurrent growth of fandom and science fiction publishing. These earlier texts were frequently collected, cited and listed by the science fiction fan and soon became a recurring theme within the science fiction magazines. Sam Moskowitz, a long time active fan and historian of fandom and science fiction edited an anthology of these stories, *When Women Rule*, which was published in 1972. His first selection is the fifth-century account by Herodotus of the Amazons. His last is "The Priestess Who Rebelled" by Nelson Bond which was originally published in the October 1939 issue of *Amazing Stories*.

I have been using the term science fiction without making it clear what my referent is. There is considerable debate about what constitutes science fiction. In the entry on "Definitions of Science Fiction" in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993) there are seven columns of discussion of just a few of these definitions. In this thesis I am not concerned with boundary delineation or maintenance of the genre. Any text published as science fiction, claimed by those engaged with science fiction to be science fiction (regardless of what else it may

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that Feminism is a contested term. I use it throughout this thesis to refer to engagements with unequal relations between men and women as well with the masculinist discourses through which understandings are constituted.

be), is, for my purposes, science fiction. My rationale is that the focus of my thesis is on those who produce and consume texts, as well as those texts themselves. As I discuss in more detail in chapter one, I use science fiction to refer to a community, or rather, communities. These communities' physical location is centred on the United States of America although there are community members, like myself, who are located outside the USA.

Fandom, and science fiction as a commercial genre, emerged in the USA and the majority of the battle of the sexes texts I examine were published there. In 1993-1994, as part of my project, I spent five months doing research in North America, first in Toronto, then in New York City and San Francisco. My 'fieldwork' had the dual purpose of accessing texts that are unavailable in Australia, and making connections with science fiction communities. I interviewed writers, publishers, editors, fans, agents, as well as the sf buyers for the two major book chains - Dalton's and Walden's. I also went to my first sf conventions: the 1993 World Fantasy Convention in Minneapolis and the 1993 ArmadilloCon in Austin, Texas. These two conventions, coming early in my trip, while I was still based in Toronto, allowed me to meet many people in the community before I went to New York City and San Francisco. I was able to meet with and interview almost everyone I needed to talk to. I am grateful to the science fiction community in North America for being so welcoming and supportive of my project.

My thesis draws on, and is also a contribution to, a variety of fields, most especially feminist theory, semiotics, American studies, cultural studies, literary theory, science fiction, and histories of sexuality. I do not view these fields as being discrete, nor do I view them as consisting only of a body of written texts. Part of my project is to continue recent moves away from a practice/theory binary (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 70-71). I argue that science fiction texts, and indeed all texts, are engaged in a series of discourses about sexuality, knowledge, subjectivity, power, in short, social relations and the world. Texts are not merely examples of the operations of these discourses. My approach



involves moving away from a treatment of 'fictional' texts as the raw material of analysis; and 'theoretical' texts as the means of explicating such texts. In this light I view semiotics, literary theory and work on the history of sexuality as engaging in dialogue with the science fiction texts which are the focus of my thesis. The thesis emerges from this dialogue.

Reading these science fiction texts and talking and meeting with science fiction practitioners shaped my readings of Katie King, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and Thomas Laqueur as much as my readings of these theorists influenced the way I have engaged with the field of science fiction.

All fiction is engaged in both theory and practice, indeed all writing, all speech is doing both/and rather than either/or. All language *is* metalanguage. However, here I am making a special claim for science fiction. Science fiction is more overt about its place within discourses of knowledge than other literary genres. For example, both the battle of the sexes texts in science fiction and the romance genre are concerned with relations between the sexes and hence both engage with discourses of sex, sexuality and gender. In romance the traces of these discourses are typically visible as part of the narrative patterns. In the battle of the sexes texts there are more overt, often didactic contributions, to these discourses. Questions such as - What would happen if a society were controlled by women? What would happen if there were few or no men? - are explicitly raised and answered. In Judith Butler's (1990) terms the performance of gender is what the battle of the sexes texts are about, whereas particular performances of gender are the given of the majority of romance genre texts (Radway 1984; Thurston 1987; Christian-Smith 1990).

That science fiction overtly engages with discourses of knowledge (stereotypically with science) is not a new claim. In 1960 Kingsley Amis argued that this is precisely what marks science fiction as being different from other genres. In a discussion of Philip Wylie's 1951 battle of the sexes novel, *The Disappearance*, Amis writes that

my point here is not to debate the merits of Wylie's thesis, nor even of his arguments, but simply to suggest that, as things are, the only kind of fiction in which they could be deployed is science fiction (Amis 1960: 76).

Amis suggests that this would not work in other genres: "one imagines how a reader of Westerns would take to a twenty-page discussion of frontier ethics" (Amis 1960: 79). Indeed, many of the battle of the sexes texts from 1926 to 1973 routinely include large sections of exposition and philosophical explication. In the novel mentioned by Amis, Wylie's *The Disappearance*, Chapter XIII is billed as "An essay on the philosophy of sex, or the lack thereof." Another battle of the sexes text, John Wyndham's 1956 "Consider Her Ways," includes a long dialogue between an historian and a woman from the distant past of the twentieth century. In this dialogue the use of discourses of romantic love as a means of keeping women subordinate is debated (Wyndham [1956] 1965: 43-64).

Both these instances of engagement with debates about the social constructions of women and men and the organisation of relations between them are made possible because they take place in science fiction. This is because science fiction is not tied to a "mimetic faithfulness to the world as it is" (Jackson 1995: 95). The process of imagining a world in which women are the dominant sex immediately exposes many of the processes which normally operate to keep women subordinate. Imagining a different world makes these processes of power *visible*.

Science fiction's lack of mimetic faithfulness operates even at the level of its grammar. Samuel R. Delany argues that there are "clear and sharp differences" between science fiction and mundane fiction<sup>2</sup> "right down to the way we read individual sentences" (Delany 1984: 88). He gives a number of examples of this difference in reading practices, such as, "he turned on his left side" (Delany 1984: 88).<sup>3</sup> In the mundane sense this means that he turned over on to

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<sup>2</sup> A science fiction term for non-science fiction literature. Delany says that the term comes from *mundus*, meaning the world; stories that take place on Earth in the present or past. Any other connotations? Well, turnabout is fair play (Delany 1984: 88).

<sup>3</sup> The article "Science Fiction and 'Literature' - or, the Conscience of the King, from which this quote comes, was first delivered as a speech in 1979.

his left side; in the science fictional sense it means that he flicked a switch and his left side lit up.<sup>4</sup> I use systemic functional grammar to make clear the difference in lexical and grammatical meaning:

Mundane Analysis		
He	turned	on his left side
Actor	Process	Circumstance: Location

Science Fictional Analysis		
He	turned on	his left side
Actor	Process	Goal

I find M. A. K. Halliday's functional grammar valuable because it enables me to talk about how word choices are combined with grammatical meaning. The example above demonstrates that a grammatical analysis allows me to show clearly the differences between two clauses with exactly the same wording. I can demonstrate that in the mundane clause "his left side" becomes the location of his activities, rather than an immediate participant in these activities as it is in the science fiction clause. I discuss my use of Halliday's functional grammar in more detail in chapter one.

What do I mean by the terms sex, gender and sexuality? Eve Sedgwick argues that the "usage relations and analytical relations" of these three terms are "almost irremediably slippery" (Sedgwick 1990: 27). The distinction between sex and gender has typically understood "sex as biological given and gender as a social construction which overlays this biology" (Gatens 1996: 31). Charting the moment at which the one begins and the other ends has proven elusive. Indeed,

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<sup>4</sup>These two different reading practices explain much about those people who insist they can not understand science fiction, that it is too difficult and boring. "All that technobabble." I used this example at a recent systemics conference and was struck by the fact that the audience was totally surprised by the science fictional reading of the clause. When I was doing the analysis the mundane reading of the clause seemed ungrammatical to me and I had to concentrate to remember how to make sense of it.

the very notion that ‘the body’ and its sex *are* biological givens and have remained so throughout history is no longer tenable (Martin 1987; Laqueur 1990; Oudshoorn 1994). Sedgwick argues that

even usages involving the sex/gender system within feminist theory are able to use sex/gender only to delineate a problematical space rather than a crisp distinction. My own loose usage in this book will be to denominate that problematized space of the sex/gender system, the whole package of physical and cultural distinctions between women and men, more simply under the rubric gender. I do this in order to reduce the likelihood of confusion between sex in the sense of ‘the space of differences between male and female (what I’ll be grouping under gender)’ and sex in the sense of sexuality (Sedgwick 1990: 29).

I find Sedgwick convincing on this point. I will, however, reverse her decision and use the term ‘sex’ to refer to this “problematized space”. I do this for two reasons:

for consistency - because in the battle of the sexes texts the term ‘sex’ is used in this way, and

because, as Sedgwick notes above, there is a confusion between ‘sex’ meaning “the space of differences between male and female” and ‘sex’ meaning sexuality and acts of sexual intimacy including intercourse (Sedgwick 1990: 29).

Confusion and blurring between the two is another characteristic of many of the battle of the sexes texts where a person’s sexuality is one of the most important aspects of what makes them either man or woman. This is also a central component of their subjectivity. Learning the categories that constitute a person’s sense of their self includes knowing that you are a man or a woman.

My understanding of subjectivity grows out of feminist post-structuralist accounts of the subject which problematise the idea that we are all historically continuous and unitary. Instead of viewing “contradictory positions as problematic, as something to be reconciled or remedied” I examine “these contradictions as important sites for understanding what it means to be a gendered person” (Davies & Harre 1990: 47). The battle of the sexes is one such site.

Constructions of sexed bodies: male, female, hermaphrodite, androgynous or something else, and their interactions, are also central to the James Tiptree, Jr.

Memorial Award which has been awarded annually since 1991 to “a fictional work which explores and expands the roles of women and men” (Murphy [1991] 1992: 9). The award was named for James Tiptree, Jr., a science fiction writer who began publishing in 1968. Tiptree was

the winner of multiple Nebulas. Revealed in mid-career as Alice Sheldon, and forever after, in every introduction, revealed as Alice Sheldon. James Tiptree, Jr. who helped break down the imaginary barrier between women's writing and men's writing (Murphy [1991] 1992: 9).

The Award was also named for James Tiptree, Jr. because until that time there had been “no science fiction award named after a woman” and because Tiptree (who also wrote under the name Raccoona Sheldon) wrote many stories which “explore and expand the roles of women and men” (Murphy [1991] 1992: 9).

My thesis demonstrates that there are direct links between the battle of the sexes genre 1926-1973, James Tiptree, Jr., and the James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award. Tiptree actually wrote battle of the sexes stories during the period 1926-1973. Indeed Russ discusses one of them, “Mama Come Home,” first published in 1968, in her battle of the sexes article. Battle of the sexes texts are overtly engaged in the kinds of exploration and extrapolation that the Tiptree Award was created to encourage and recognise, though frequently these texts work to contract, rather than expand, what it is to be a woman and what it is to be a man.

### *Summary of chapters and appendices*

All the chapter titles in my thesis are taken from names of short stories by James Tiptree, Jr. In the first chapter, “The Girl Who Was Plugged In”, I discuss my theory and methodology. I make it clear that science fiction is a genre which is not just a series of written texts, but a community or field. I also examine my own ‘voyage of discovery’ and the transformation for me of ‘genre’ into ‘field’ and my becoming part of that field.

In the second chapter, “Faithful to thee, Terra, in our fashion”, I discuss the emergence of the field of science fiction and the closely related field of

fandom and the complex relationships between the two fields. I also discuss the relationship between the idea of “science” and the field of science fiction.

Chapter three, “Mama Come Home”, and chapter four, “Painwise”, concern the battle of the sexes from 1926 to 1973. I give close readings of a number of battle of sexes texts. In chapter three my concern is with texts which are most frequently read as being overtly anti-feminist whereas in chapter four I am concerned with texts which offer responses to the ‘Sex War’ other than the reversion of women to a status of inferiority.

In chapter five, “Fault”, I examine engagements between science fiction, women and feminism as they emerge in letters and articles in science fiction magazines and also some fanzines from 1926 until 1975. Most of these debates are concerned with whether there is any place for women in science fiction at all. I also make connections between these debates and the battle of the sexes stories that I discuss in the previous two chapters.

Chapter six, “The Women Men Don’t See”, is concerned with other engagements between science fiction and women and feminism from 1926 until the present. The debates in this chapter differ from the previous chapter in that they take it for granted that there is a place for women within science fiction,

In chapter seven, “I’m too big but I love to play”, I construct a biography of James Tiptree, Jr., Raccoona Sheldon, Alice Sheldon, Alice Davey and Alice Hastings Bradley who ‘are’ all the one ‘person’ but at the same time are not. I examine the sets of stories that surround him/her and his/her engagements with science fiction.

In chapter eight, “Her Smoke Rose Up Forever”, I look at the formation of the James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award and its connections with James Tiptree, Jr./Alice Sheldon, as well as with the battle of the sexes and science fiction communities.

There are four appendices. The first appendix is a complete list of the battle of the sexes texts published between 1926 - 1973 which I discovered in the course of my research. The second appendix is an annotated list of all the Tiptree

Award winning and shortlisted texts as well as all the texts considered for the Award. The third appendix contains my grammatical analysis of three passages which I examine in chapter three. The last appendix is a brief account of the New York fan group, the Futurians.

There are many illustrations in this thesis. I have included these images for visual reinforcement of my arguments and also to give a feel for the material my thesis is concerned with.