

WisCon 15, March 2, 1991

In light of recent events in the world, I think it may be appropriate to begin this speech with a somewhat condensed version of a Bedouin folk tale from Iraq. This story, called “The Good Neighbors,” begins with a poor man pitching his tents near those of a wealthy sheikh. The sheikh, being a generous man, welcomes this poor stranger and sees that he and his family lack for nothing. Unfortunately, the youngest of the poor man’s three sons becomes enamored of the sheikh’s daughter, and grows so persistent in courting her that the girl finally goes to her father and asks him what to do.

The sheikh solves the problem by moving his tents and letting the poor man know that he’s no longer welcome to camp near him. But the poor man is deeply troubled by the loss of this friendship, and wonders what he could have done to provoke this rift. After questioning his three sons, he discovers that the youngest was trying to seduce the sheikh’s daughter. The man takes out his sword on the spot and cuts off his errant son’s head, then has it delivered as a gift to the sheikh.

The sheikh is now torn by remorse, realizing, in the words of this story, that the poor man “was truer than a brother and as jealous of his name” (Bushnaq p. 32). To atone for doubting his friend, he offers his daughter in marriage to one of the poor man’s surviving sons. The tale ends with these words: “So it was that two men, one a sheikh and protector, the other a poor subject and neighbor, but equals in honor and pride, were tied by bonds of marriage and lived to take pleasure in the children of their children” (Bushnaq p.33).

In other words, the story has a happy ending. I won’t speculate on what this story might reveal about this country’s recent adversary, but it may be worth considering the role the sheikh’s daughter plays. By rebuffing a persistent suitor, then prevailing upon her father for some way to get rid of him, she causes her father to doubt his friend. Her feelings are not mentioned elsewhere in the story, but she apparently serves her purpose by becoming the means through which the breach is healed. Presumably, having preserved her honor, she is content to become the wife of one of the poor man’s surviving sons, but somehow I doubt it. How she felt upon finding out that her rejected suitor’s head had been delivered to her father is never discussed.

Our cultural presuppositions are, of course, different from those reflected in this story. We at least give lip service to the idea that women can take care of themselves without having to prevail upon their nearest male relatives to handle a problem—with who knows what results. Certainly our attitudes have changed, a fact brought home to me when our recent war first broke out. My two nieces, who are eight and ten years old, expressed fears common to a lot of kids. One of the most nerve-racking fears, a possibility that brought my younger niece to tears, was that her father might have to fight and be taken away from her. My brother reassured her that this was hardly likely to happen at his age and with his lack of military service. This didn’t entirely soothe her. Her next question was, “But what if mom has to go?”

Perhaps we can best call this an ambiguous advance in our thinking.

Since the theme of this convention is “Feminism and Science Fiction,” I might as well say that I had thought that one *unambiguous* advance is the greater role women who write science fiction are playing in this field. No one could say to me now, as a couple of people did almost twenty years ago when I first thought of putting together an anthology of science fiction by women: “Are there enough stories to make a book?” Does anyone doubt that writers who happen to be women have made a substantial contribution to this field? I didn’t think it possible, and please forgive my naiveté, but I’ve been so distracted by research for a historical novel in recent years that I haven’t kept up with some current science-fiction controversies. So it came as something of a shock when I recently came upon this statement by Charles Platt, which I may as well quote:

“Thus from the New Wave, via the *Dangerous Visions* series, then Damon Knight’s *Orbit* anthologies and Milford writing workshops, evolved a generation who used the props of science fiction (aliens, time travel, starships) without any real interest in plausibility as their predecessors had known it. A new ‘soft’ science fiction emerged, largely written by women: Joan Vinge, Vonda McIntyre, Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Kate Wilhelm,

Carol Emshwiller. Their concern for human values was admirable, but they eroded science fiction's one great strength that had distinguished it from all other fantastic literature: its implicit claim that events described could actually come true." (Platt, p. 44)

Well, shame on me—I reprinted stories by all these writers in my *Women of Wonder* anthologies. I never dreamed I was helping to erode science fiction. I suppose we can consider this another ambiguous advance. Once, women were discouraged from entering the boys' clubhouse, and now we are influential enough to be responsible for the decline of the field. Perhaps Charles Platt would advise us to emulate the sheikh's daughter, and look to men – or at least to their writings—to preserve our honor.

But maybe I shouldn't be too hard on Charles Platt, who at least admits women have made a contribution of some sort, however he might disparage it. Apparently others exist in an alternate world where certain science fiction books, including some by women, have never been written. At least that's the only way I can understand what Lewis Shiner—incidentally, a writer for whom, I have a lot of respect—had to say recently on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times*.

His short essay was called "Confessions of an Ex-Cyberpunk," and in it, he bemoaned the fact that a literary movement he thought might revitalize the field had turned into what he called a cliché and a dead end that glorified materialism and offered only power fantasies. He ended by saying:

"I find myself waiting—maybe in vain—for a new literature of idealism and compassion that is contemporary not only on the technological level but also the emotional. It would show the price that must be paid for solutions to our problems; it would see the computer neither as enemy nor god but as a tool for human purposes. I believe this—not cyberpunk—is the attitude we need to get us into the 21st century" (Shiner).

I couldn't agree with him more, but some of us were writing exactly that kind of literature, or at least attempting to do so. I guess Lewis Shiner didn't read any of it.

But maybe it isn't fair to make too much of this. Back in the Pleistocene, when I started writing, some of us considered various earlier science fiction books and stories passé or irrelevant—but at least we knew about them, or were dimly aware of them. Recently, it seems that more and more newer writers are ignorant of what came before and this isn't entirely their fault; a lot of past work simply isn't being reprinted. I had expected that a time might come when my work and that of some of my contemporaries might be ignored, criticized for various reasons, or considered old-fashioned by young

Turks, but hadn't anticipated having it treated as if it had never existed. Some of us, in recent years, have felt as insignificant as that sheikh's daughter probably did.

I also suspect Lewis Shiner, along with most of us, finds it impossible to keep up with everything that's published. When I started there was the New Wave and the old, and plenty of ideological and literary disputes, but we tended to think of ourselves, roughly, as being in the same field. Today, a lot of us might as well be writing in entirely different genres. The fact is that much of what is published now requires—at least according to the wisdom of publishers and their conglomerate overseers—a label, or at least some sort of clear sign that signals what its content is to a reader. That these labels or signals may misrepresent what is inside the covers is beside the point—at least for almost everyone except the writer. So anyone glancing around the science fiction section of a bookstore could very easily draw the conclusion that the dominant subgenres of the field are martial tales of adventure with advanced weaponry, stories of computerized cyberpunk loners, series created by a prominent writer and written by others (whose names appear on the cover in *tiny* type), and a hybrid form that owes as much to fantasy as to science fiction, along with the cosmic blockbuster bestseller, the occasional book that signals that it is "classic" science fiction, and others that bear the marks of "serious" literary works. And presumably this packaging will draw readers to the books they're most likely to enjoy. Unfortunately, it also discourages them from picking up books that may not be what they seem.

Conspicuously absent from these various sub-categories is anything that is blatantly labeled "feminist" work—although women are, to a greater or lesser degree, represented in all the aforementioned categories. I got an inkling of why this is the case a couple of years ago, after reading a review of a short story collection of mine in the journal *Short Form*.

The review began: "When I first read in the foreword by Michael Bishop that Pamela Sargent was a feminist writer, I immediately dismissed her as the type of writer who openly states her attitude toward men: to heck with them" (Little, p. 11). To be honest, anyone who knows me also knows I'd use stronger language than that, but to continue: "In my mind's eye, she became a cold, calculating she-bitch before I even gave her a chance" (Little p. 11).

I think I should point out that this was the first paragraph of what turned out to be a *good* review. Maybe I should be grateful the reviewer decided I wasn't a she-bitch, and that she liked my stories, but my pleasure was somewhat diminished by her use of what I considered and eminently respectable term as a dubious epithet.

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It seems to me that at the core of both feminism and science fiction—at least what should be at the core of both—is a questioning of why things are as they are and how they might be different. And certainly there are writers who raise such questions in both a science-fictional and feminist context. It would be hard to do any kind of study of late twentieth century utopian literature without considering some of the work of Ursula K. Le Guin, Joan Slonczewski, Suzette Haden Elgin, Joanna Russ, Sheri Tepper, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and others—one might almost say that it's largely women writers who are keeping the utopian tradition alive. But somebody tuned in to the marketplace will probably tell me that having a novel labeled a "utopia" is almost as deadly as being called "feminist."

So, at the moment, any of us who might be feminists or have utopian leanings have to take on the protective coloration of whatever currently fashionable label might sell our work. And, to be honest, although I wish passionately that the term "feminist" had not fallen into disrepute in certain circles, maybe it's just as well that science fiction informed and illuminated by feminism didn't harden into another category, because in the literary marketplace as it now exists, that might only have produced imitative, derivative works and demands by publishers for more such yarns, which would soon—commercial publishing being what it is—have their own sets of restrictions and clichés that would only limit the writer.

And if it's the case that science fiction reflects the culture around it, our current genre sub-categories certainly do that. I began by alluding to our recent conflict. Whatever stance one takes on this war, and whatever justifications there might have been for fighting it, it is clearly a tragedy, as all wars are, and it is a tragedy of a particular sort. A society that thought it become powerful with the aggressive use of a technology it doesn't truly comprehend, which is only a thin layer atop a culture that looks to the past, has been devastated by a technological one that has made its power fantasies real, and which may fall into the trap of believing its tools and marvels of advanced engineering can solve every problem. And in this case, it may be that the very effectiveness of our advanced weaponry will leave us with a legacy technology can't solve—the enduring resentment and hatred of some groups in that region of the world, and a society that could descend into chaos.

I may be pushing things a bit if I say that, metaphorically, I see something of Iraq (and some other places as well) in the kind of science fiction where the technological details and devices are really only a veneer over a story that isn't rooted in a scientific culture at all, but in something else altogether, and something of our culture in all those novels that glorify future wars. One

uses technology as an end in itself, with what Lewis Shiner called in the article I mentioned before, "technical, engineered solutions."

In addition to this, in spite of our talk about science fiction being a literature of change, we seem to be the reflection of what may be a declining culture. Writers are more and more often encouraged to repeat themselves rather than pushing in new directions, or encouraged to elaborate on scenarios devised by older and more prominent writers. Now we even have classics of science fiction being added to or continued by other writers. The publishers call these books collaborations, but I can think of them only as commentaries on the sacred texts.

This is the antithesis of what we're supposed to be about. If this is a true reflection of what's going on in our culture at large, then our descendants, whatever tools they may possess, may be as lost in dreams of past glory as some of the current heirs of ancient Mesopotamia. They may become, no explorers or cyberpunks, but people who might be called, for lack of a better term, technopeasants.

Surely we can do better than that, both fictionally and in the real world. And fortunately, there are writers—not all of them female, I should add—who are doing better than that, whatever labels and packaging their books may wear. I happen to be one of those who values the literary tradition of realism, but being a realist doesn't require only understanding the uses of computers and gadgetry, or (on the other hand) the sense that certain human dilemmas will always exist apart from such tools, and that new ones may be created by them. It demands the deepest questioning of what the universe *in fact is*, and a willingness to look for *possible* answers.

I would like to think that, in a different sort of world, the sheikh's daughter I mentioned before, instead of turning to her father or passively accepting her lot, might have altered events by taking her camels and going elsewhere—perhaps to a place where she could be free to question the assumptions of those around her to do something to change them.

I urge all of you to do the same within yourselves.

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