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Women's Studies

The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction
Justine Larbalestier
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Hotbed of feminism, or exclusive male retreat? Dependent on cerebrations and fact, or awash in sloppy sentimentality? A combination of extremes? Just what is science fiction from women's point of view?

Isaac Asimov and other icons have weighed in on these debates. Many defined women's place in SF as housekeeping on Mars, or providing sexual release for the (male) scientists sent there to work. Donald Turnbull said, "A woman's place is not in anything scientific. Of course the odd female now and then invents something useful, in the way that every now and then amongst the millions of black crows a white one is found." Women who wrote SF often did so under ambiguous pseudonyms.

The author, a research fellow at the University of Sydney and a former jurist on SF award panels, examines the arguments on both sides in this extensive study. She relates her findings to today's issues and authors, using extensive and often surprising quotes. Since SF served as a liberating force for so many women, numerous modern authors among them, the issue may seem moot. Yet Larbalestier proves that it is worth discussing, including examples of early works and examining letters that fans and authors sent to early magazines in reaction to stories and discussions.

Addressing the questions of whether women belonged in SF stories and whether they could write them (without turning them into sentimental “soft” SF), Larbalestier examines the Tiptree Award, presented to SF or fantasy authors whose books explore and expand gender roles. The award is named for James Tiptree, Jr., a pseudonym of Alice Sheldon, a woman of fascinating and difficult background (childhood journeys on safari, employment with the CIA, etc.). She was unquestioningly accepted as male for the “masculine” yet liberated viewpoint in her stories. When she was discovered to be a woman, attitudes among many reversed direction completely.

As in any study of this nature, there are omissions (Andre Norton and C.J. Cherryh come to mind). Some deconstruction sections may be tedious for those not interested in such detail. It is, however, a thorough, engrossing, and valid study, well worth reading and with fascinating revelations for old and new SF readers alike.

Marlene Satter