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<p style="text-align:center">Women and Science Fiction</p>

The relationship between women and science fiction is an important one that had to be built up over time and through the judgment of their male coworkers and the readership. The first big step toward opening the doors for women in science fiction was with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a book written by a woman but with a male protagonist. This concept was used a lot by female writers trying to break into the world of sci-fi; they would make their protagonist male so they could gather more readers—since the readership was primarily male— and they would sideline most female characters. The idea that women had to use male protagonists and that they had to sideline women—or not use them at all—reflects this need for female writers to gain credibility in the literary world. Shelley was the origin point for modern science fiction. She also broke the mold that science was for men by writing a science fiction novel. While, yes, the novel is based around a male character, the fact that a woman wrote it still holds merit. It is easy to see how, in the early days of writing in sci-fi, women authors might have had to stick to presenting male protagonists and characters since most audiences for such material were male. The idea of Frankenstein's monster—a word with negative connotations—is connected to men and their dominance in literature and life at that time.

It is worth keeping in mind that Shelley initially published *Frankenstein* anonymously. In "Feminist SF," author Gwenyth Jones describes how Justine Larbalestier argues that "women have been writing SF for as long as SF has been around [...] and describes a level of engagement that remained stable for decades. Women writers and fans were a disproportionately effective

minority group, often hiding behind initials or male pseudonyms, always "invisible" to the perception of SF as an exclusively male activity" (2009). In Adam Roberts's "Science Fiction," he states, "[I]t cannot be denied that the Golden Age readership of SF was predominantly [...] male, whereas the audience for SF today, particularly in America, is in the majority female. Two things account for this shift" (93-94). The first is how authors like Ursula Le Guin, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Andre Norton "began writing male-centered, technological SF derived heavily from the Golden Age conventions" (Roberts 93-94). The second was one that "introduced a large body of female fans to SF," and this was done through the TV show *Star Trek* (Roberts 93-94).

Any discussion of women sci-fi writers "hidden" behind initials would be incomplete without mentioning award-winning writer D.C. Fontana, who authored several iconic *Star Trek* episodes, including "Journey to Babel," providing fascinating background to the character Spock by introducing audiences to his parents. Dorothy Catherine Fontana helped blaze new trails for female writers. "Star Trek has always had plenty of women shaping the stories told on-screen. TOS, produced in the 1960s, had 22.5% of the episodes written by women, a statistic that shines compared to series with very few women behind the scenes" (startrek.com). *Star Trek* has consistently pushed for representation in front of and behind the camera, and Fontana is owed a debt of gratitude for breaking the glass ceiling for others to follow her.

Women writers in science fiction have modified or adapted some of the most common sci-fi tropes to address specific social and cultural concerns and problems in the world and, more importantly, in science fiction. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula Le Guin flips the trope of Earth being the origin of humanity on its head. Yes, humans came from Earth at one point, but

that was hundreds of years ago, not in Genly Ai time. However, in a world where the creatures are more often than not nonbinary, Le Guin failed because she made the generic gender terms the masculine, he/him, instead of they/them. In Nnedi Okorafor's "Spider the Artist," she flips the theme of otherness on its head by creating a relationship between a human—Eme—and a robot – Udide—which should not be possible, yet as Udide gets to learn more about Eme it becomes attached and willing to defend Eme. Another story that flips an idea is "Mother Ocean" by Vandana Singh. In this story, like in "Spider the Artist," an unlikely friendship is formed between two very different species: a human and a blue whale.

The "relationship" between women and science fiction has been, and remains, vexed and conflicted. In Helen Merrick's "Gender in science fiction," she explains how "some SF texts were justified in omitting women altogether [but] was predicated on the notion that their ostensible subject matter were inherently masculine endeavors." (241). This was shown through Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*, even though the main character is a woman. The novel contains many forms of testosterone through Dana's relationship with her husband Kevin and her ancestor Rufus, both of whom are white, whereas she is Black. These relationships are noticed by the other black characters, such as Negel, who asks Dana, "'Why you try to talk like white folks?' Nigel asked me. 'I don't,' I said, surprised. 'I mean, this is really the way I talk.' 'More like white folks than some white folks'" (Butler 74). Philosophical conversations such as these have women write more soft science fiction dedicated to character development and science like philosophy and psychology. Soft science fiction can be found in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* through her development of the relationship between Genly Ai and Estraven as well as the philosophical idea of loyalty, which Genly states, "no, I don't mean love, when I say patriotism. I

mean fear. The fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression. It grows in us, that fear. It grows in us year by year" (Le Guin). On the other hand, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* would be considered hard sci-fi with its descriptions of sciencey exposition, usually the key point of hard sci-fi, which used to be paired with male authors. In contrast, soft science fiction was paired with women.

However, this same "relationship" between women and science fiction has also been and continues to be one of potential. While the title of *Mad Max: Fury Road* has a man's name in the title, it hints at the main female character, Furiosa: fury. There is also symbolism in the form of the word Road as it is a path to somewhere and, in this case, freedom. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the main character appears to be Furiosa, with Max as her sidekick. She, along with the many mothers and wives, thwarts Immortan Joe and his blind loyal followers' attempts to gain back his "property." One scene that stood out was when Furiosa had one of the wives count out the inventory of the bullets. It is such a small thing, but very powerful in the grand scheme of things because those bullets represent death but also freedom and power, whereas before, her only role was to bear children. Now, however, she shows that she can do more than that.

Science fiction has served as an important platform for issues specific to women and, even more specifically, women of color and transwomen. Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* is an excellent example of this because, as an African American writer, she wrote about what she knew: the experiences of a young black girl (set in the future). She creates a story centered around a black female protagonist in a world still prejudiced against different types of people, Binti's people. While waiting in line for boarding, the woman behind Binti tugs at her hair, causing her to turn around and find everyone staring at her. The woman who had pulled her hair said that the otjize

smelled of "'jasmine flowers' [...] surprised," while the woman next to her said, "I hear it smells like shit because it is shit" (Okorafor 16).

It has also provided a platform for feminist works. "A History of SF" explains how the "discussions of women and science fiction are more often than not treated as separate, special subjects, rather than integrated into the larger history of the genre," which is why authors such as Helen Phillips of the "The Disaster Store" have such strong themes of motherhood attached to a very bleak world (Hoagland 9). The only indication that would suggest it is SF is that the reader feels that there was a postapocalyptic disaster. It is all about a mother of two going to the store while trying to keep an eye on her daughter, who tends to escape. The woman has taken on the role of someone who would risk their life—usually seen as a man.

In the early days of writing in science fiction, women authors might have had to stick to presenting male protagonists and characters since many audiences for such material were male. As in all endeavors, women would have first to prove themselves capable of participating in an area dominated by men before eventually gaining recognition and acceptance from their male colleagues and male-dominated audience. As time passed, the SF audience expanded, with many more women reading and an explosion in the number of women SF authors.

In "The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction: Problems of Definition," Rick Altman notes:

> While critics have an interest in discussing and promoting these qualities in the language
> of genre, producers are generally divided between those with small budgets. [...] This
> logic underpins producer Ronald D. Moore's claim reiterated throughout the run of
> *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009), that it was not SF but a drama that happened in an SF

context. [...] Parallels can be found in the ways in which different SF books solicit

different SF and/or non-SF readerships through design, cover art and jacket blurbs.

(Bould & Vint, 2)

By taking this approach, Moore was able to elevate many strong female characters who all had

key roles in the run of his series, and one-half of the ensemble cast was made up of women.

"What the Dead Man Said" is a strained relationship between a father and daughter in a

postapocalyptic setting because global warming has ravaged the Earth. It is set in an area

formerly known as Nigeria. The main character is a woman who has returned to the home of her

father—the titular "Dead Man." She and her mother left thirty years prior. It flat out says that as

a child, she was raped, and then later on, it was strongly suggested that it was her father's brother

who did it.

Science fiction's relationship with women has come a long way, but it has remained

strong thanks to women like Mary Shelley, Ursula Le Guin, and Octavia E. Butler.

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