

Linguistics and Science Fiction: A Language and Gender Short Bibliography

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Bûidiaril láad len medoniláadeth hal el dan ededidethuháa.

We will look at the worldviews imaged in science fiction (SF) created languages

I have just finished teaching a course entitled Linguistics and Science Fiction. In this course we looked at the topic from three points of view: SF created languages and the worldviews imaged therein, which statement a student rendered into Láadan, the headline above; SF with linguistics and/or linguists as major plot devices; and, thirdly, how SF writers in English manage to construct worlds where derivational thinking, basic to English, does not function. In summer 1999 course information will be available at <http://grove.ufl.edu/~hardman/>, or I can make the information available via e-mail (hardman@ufl.edu).

For the pleasure of the readers of Women and Language I would like to share the list of novels that we used as texts, plus some of those that the students abstracted to share with the class. All these novels relate to language and gender, in one way or another. A good many of them I learned of originally through the James E. Tiptree Award for gender bending science fiction. (For a description and listing see <http://www.tiptree.org/index.html>.)

Suzette Haden Elgin has said (Linguistics & Science Fiction 1996), Linguistics is our best tool for bringing about social change and SF is our best tool for testing such changes before they are implemented in the real world, therefore the conjunction of the two is desirable and should be useful. This particular set of novels certainly gives her statement validity. Enjoy! (To subscribe to the Newsletter, Linguistics and Science Fiction, contact ocls@ipa.net)

Suzette Haden Elgin's Native Tongue trilogy: *Native Tongue* (New York: DAW Books, 1984); *Judas Rose* (New York: DAW books, 1987); *Earthsong* (New York: DAW books, 1994).

Native Tongue and *Judas Rose* deal with the development, distribution and effects of the woman-created language Láadan. Both are complex novels with fascinating insights into linguistics and into the way in which language creates reality. The major characters are linguists whose livelihood is discovering the grammar of, and acting as interpreters for, alien languages. Earth depends on alien trade, so it also depends on the linguists. The third volume is something of a disjuncture in both content and style with the first two. The aliens are gone and instead of Láadan, audiosynthesis is the science fiction element. I use the first two in my Language and Gender courses.

Nalo Hopkinson. *Brown Girl in the Ring* (Werner: Aspect 1998).

Caribbean creole set in a future collapsed Toronto, this book takes us out of our own world by a consistent and most beautiful use of Creole itself in the dialogue. The students loved it. This is

a first novel by a young author. The major character is a young woman resisting her own talents, which are of an SF nature.

Ursula K. Le Guin. *Left Hand of Darkness*, 25th Anniversary edition. (New York : Walker, 1994).

We used two major works of Ursula Le Guin, this one from 25 years ago. The 25th anniversary edition contains an appendix that deals extensively, in fiction form, with the issue of the generic masculine. On the planet of Winter the people are only sexed beings once a month, and which sex depends on circumstance and chance; people have quite ordinary and extensive experience being both sexes. An Earth ambassador recounts his experiences. A marvelous thought experiment and a classic of SF.

Ursula LeGuin. *Always Coming Home*; composer, Todd Barton; artist, Margaret Chodos; George Hersh, geomancer; maps drawn by the author. (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

LeGuin's second volume that we used is more recent. She employs in this text the "carrier bag" style of writing--really quite fascinating and a beautiful book to hold. Take her seriously when she says you don't have to read it linearly. This is a marvelous example of our third topic -- writing in English, but not incorporating Derivational Thinking. A tape comes with the hardback edition with music and poetry in Kesh, the language she invents for the people the future anthropologist/linguist/archaeologist is studying.

Moon, Elizabeth. *Remnant Population* (Baen 1996/97).

With a major character a woman of grandmotherly age, this is a great read. Moon does some interesting phonological stuff with the language of the aliens and her depiction of military / government, etc. types is quite delicious. Don't be put off by the cover--Moon doesn't like it either.

Mary Doria Russell. *The Sparrow* (Villard / Random House, 1996); and *The Children of God* (Villard / Random House, 1998).

These two books exemplify our second topic: The major character is a linguist, member of the Society of Jesus. In many ways, it is a futuristic replay of the Jesuits in the Americas. Unfortunately, a couple of serious linguistic gaffs in the first book detract quite unnecessarily, but overall the linguistics are reasonably well handled and the story is quite riveting. Two alien

languages present differing worldviews and grammatical structures, though we only see a little bit of the languages themselves; a lot is linguistic description through the eyes of the linguist and others. Gender roles in the two groups are one of the foci.

Elizabeth Vonarburg, *Maerlande Chronicles*, translated from the French by Jane Brierley, (Victoria, B.C. : Beach Holme, 1992). A Tesseract book.

A very rare successful role reversal in a complex beautifully crafted post-holocaust future where the base form in the language is feminine. I do not believe it coincidental that this is a translation (and a superb one, authorized by the author) from the original French.

We also used two longish short stories that are somewhat hard come by; they have appeared in various now out-of-print collections. James Tiptree, Jr.'s *The Women Men Don't See* and *Houston, Houston, Do You Read? The Women Men Don't See* can be found in *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* and in *Future Earths* and elsewhere. *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* can be found in *Star Songs of an Old Primate* and elsewhere. The language in both is exquisite, superbly well crafted. *The Women Men Don't See* is about an airplane crash in Maya land where a man's view of the world is contrasted neatly with women's reality, in subtle storytelling. *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* is of a future earth without men (thanks to virus/gene-meddling laboratories) where three anachronisms arrive from a NASA accident. We see those we live with through the eyes of women who have never met those who can not behave as people.

From the abstracted novels (those read only by one student and shared in commentary) I considered one, but it is more satire than science fiction: Gerd Brantenberg's, *Egalia's Daughters, a satire of the sexes* (Seattle, WA:

Seal Press, 1977/1985). This is a rare successful role reversal, and, as the other above, not written originally in English. The translation from Norwegian by Louis Mackay,, authorized by the author, is utterly successful and this book is hilarious. This is a good short read that will have you holding your sides. I plan to use this next time I teach a Language and Gender course.

Two books I would have used as texts but they are out-of-print; you'll have to find them as used books.

1. Eleanor Arnason: *A Woman of the Iron People* (New York: Morrow, 1991); and *Avonova*, in two parts. Part one is *In the Light of Sigma*; part two is *Changing Woman*. Both published by Draconis in 1992. A linguist on an alien planet is the major figure. She meets with an ironworker--the title character. Their mutual discovery and adventures is the substance of this page turner, in two paperback volumes or one hardback tome. The human crew is diverse and we see their diverse reactions to this fascinating culture. The language they learn is a trade jargon--good linguistics.
2. Joan Slonczewski, *A Door Into Ocean* (New York: Arbor House 1986 / Avon Hearst 1987), which is a construction of a pacifist, life-loving, woman, water culture, under assault from people (not unlike are militaristic male dominated earth cultures) living under the death-spirit. Beautifully constructed, with interesting notes on the Shara language.

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