RECONFIGURING THE CLASSIC NARRATIVES OF PULP FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

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This project considers four writers that have used postmodern narrative strategies to reconfigure classic pulp science fiction tropes. The primary texts are Catherine L. Moore’s “Shambleau,” Eleanor Arnason’s “The Warlord of Saturn’s Moons, Robert Heinlein’s The Rolling Stones, and Margaret Atwood’s The Blind Assassin. Each experiments with narrative voices or uses a story-within-a-story structure. These strategies enable the authors to engage and comment on the process of how traditional tropes and narratives are brought into a new context through appropriation and reconstruction.
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I. INTRODUCTION

The four writers I have chosen to discuss have each contributed a significant and influential body of work to the science fiction (sf) genre. Catherine Moore, born in 1911, was one of the first women to be published in the sf pulp magazines, and her name is essential to any conversation about the history of women who influenced sf. Robert Heinlein, born in 1907, was a master of his craft, an engineer and author who was committed to making space travel a reality. He got his start writing for the pulps, and he wrote, lauded and criticized sf fearlessly. Heinlein was deeply involved in the sf community and watched the genre evolve out of the pulp tradition. Eleanor Arnason, born in 1942, has over four decades of experience publishing as an sf writer and is known for her progressive feminist insights. Margaret Atwood is a prolific and diverse Canadian writer, born in 1939, who has dozens of awards and publications to her credit. She has been favored with popular success and is respected also as a mainstream writer. While there is resistance to categorizing Atwood as an sf writer, Heinlein, Arnason, and Moore would never be considered anything else.

These four writers reconfigure pulp sf tropes, using postmodern narrative strategies to achieve subversive critical objectives. The selected texts all feature stories-within-stories, a technique that foregrounds the transitive relationship between literature, history and reality. They present alternative compositions to show that traditional pulp narratives can be opened to reinterpretation. By extension, they critique the authorities
that are responsible for enforcing the dominant beliefs and values of the domains in
which the tropes originate. Literary critic Eric Rabkin argues that altering pulp formulas
is an effective way to introduce change. He maintains that “Formula literature, because it
is buttressed by convention, is uniquely capable of presenting mutations – if they come in
small enough doses. As [John] Cawelti writes, literary formulas assist in the process of
assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs’ (36)” (21). In
addition to using a metafictional framework, these texts all employ the perspective of a
female pulp sf writer: Catherine Moore is a pulp writer, and the other three texts feature a
female pulp sf writer as a protagonist. The meta-texts position an author as a central
coreference as a way to represent the process of writing and a means to talk about the genre.
In the position of author-character, women are especially well placed to critique what
they observe because they often feel themselves to be outsiders in the discourses of
power. Each text will be substantiated, contextualized or amplified with historical
evidence in order to better understand the mechanisms used to construct the new
configurations and what they hope to accomplish.

Postmodern theory explains that narratives are not fixed; Jean-Francois Lyotard
famously articulates the postmodern condition as “an incredulity toward metanarratives”
(Postmodern xxiv). They are subject to being overturned, intertextualized and remade,
where each revision generates a new ontology. Brian McHale says that “Postmodernist
fiction . . . gives us a pretext for doing unlicensed ontology in a teacup” (Postmodernist
25) and describes sf as “paradigmatic” of postmodern literature, “openly and avowedly
ontological in its orientation . . . self-consciously ‘world-building’ fiction, laying bare the
process of fictional world-making itself” (Constructing 12). With these premises as a
foundation, the texts under discussion can be said to re-order ontologies when they appropriate the narratives and tropes of earlier generations.

Science fiction and postmodernism share an “ontological dominant” (McHale, *Postmodernism* 10), which means that their operative principle allows for realities to be created, multiplied and bridged. The boundaries between these worlds are negotiable by the individual, who has the capacity to locate or disguise themselves in different places, times and incarnations. When the individual relocates and reimagines the self into varied ontological states, they enter a condition of deliberately induced schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia is a process that reconfigures reality, and Frederic Jameson describes it as “a suggestive aesthetic model” (26) that explains the fractured nature of experiences. He suggests that varied realities are experienced with “hallucinogenic intensity” (28) and notes in schizophrenia a characteristic “breakdown of temporality”(27). The schizophrenic is unstuck in time, liberated to experience the past and present at will, unbound from a single reality or self, and able to traverse universes and identities as needed (and in the role of schizo-author, able to reverse-engineer fragmented experience into coherent narratives). According to theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “No one has ever been so deeply involved in history as the schizo” (21), who controls and constructs subjective realities, a strategy which can be used to experiment with changes to gender, location, identity and historical continuity in ways that counter the normative expectations.

“Progress” may have been the project of modernism, but postmodernism has no agenda. Postmodern art avoids direct confrontations; instead, traditions are borrowed only to be adapted, ideologies are assimilated and then ridiculed, order is compromised.
and history is rendered full of ambiguous spaces where once there were “facts.” The texts brought together here all borrow and repurpose topoi from sf pulp history as a means of critical inquiry. Irony is one of their strategies, as Linda Hutcheon explains, which works by the “marking of difference at the heart of similarity” (*Irony’s* 4). She argues that irony works from within to criticize borrowed discourses:

> irony . . . works as the undermining-from-within of the politically repressed (Berrendonner 1981: 239; Almansi 1984:37) . . . This is the function of irony that has specifically been called ‘counter-discursive’ in its ability to contest dominant habits of mind (Terdiman 1985:12) . . . For those marginalized and working to undo that dominance, it might be subversive or transgressive. (*Irony’s* 52)

Postmodern art is sometimes accused of complicity because it mimics or adopts elements of the discourses it seeks to criticize, but its methods show how easy it is to manipulate and destabilize the assumptions of “dominant” narratives.

Postmodernism also addresses the mixed consequences of art’s status as a commodity and the acceleration of exchanges between “high” and “low” art. The sf pulps were considered “low,” and generally beneath the notice of society’s cultural custodians (i.e., universities and museums). The medium was available to outsiders, and as per Andreas Huyssen, “art ultimately can open up emancipatory avenues if only because it is granted autonomy and practical uselessness” (152). Yet the pulps were not necessarily laboratories for radical change, and they frequently perpetuated culturally dominant values. There was profit in indulging readers who wanted simplified entertainment. Narrative formulas were generated and repeated, becoming more “kitsch” than art. Matei Calinescu explains that the repetitive subject matter of “kitsch may be
viewed as a reaction against the ‘terror’ of change” (248), and Heinlein understood this resistance to change:

> You speak of this sort of thing to an ordinary man – tell him that things are going to change – he will admit it, but he does not believe it. . . . He believes in “progress.” He thinks things will get a little bit bigger, and louder, and brighter, a few more neon signs. But he does not believe that any actual change in the basic nature of the culture in which he lives, or its technology. (*Requiem* 156)

The four writers discussed in this project find ways to introduce change into these models as a means of resistance to those institutionalized values.

Metafiction is valuable to understanding the process of how narratives are constructed, and consequently how tropes and literary conventions can be deconstructed, criticized and remade. Mas’ud Zavarzadeh’s definition of metafiction is “a narrational metatheorem whose subject matter is fiction systems themselves;” and he elaborates that “its main counter-techniques are flat characterization, contrived plots, antilinear sequences of events, all foregrounded as part of an extravagant overtotalization” (161). The writing process is demystified, its systems exposed; it is self-aware fiction. Metafiction foregrounds ontological instability and collapses the borders between art and everyday life. It sometimes reveals how writers participate in their own stories, how they imagine themselves and what they think about the problems with literature and what it can accomplish. Metafiction foregrounds ontological instability and collapses the borders between art and everyday life.

Chapter one considers the life and work of Catherine L. Moore, who wrote under an androgynous pen name and framed many of her stories with a male narrative voice. Through those voices, Moore was able to subvert and refashion narratives that she found
in myth, history, and classic pulp sf. She created a literary space that was free from the social institutions that controlled and marginalized women in her era. She was one of pulp’s Golden Age writers who began her career in the early 1930’s. Evidence from interviews and essays suggests that Moore occupied that space by dislocating from objective reality and inhabiting schizophrenic (in the postmodern sense) projections of herself that materialized as her central characters.

Chapter two presents Robert A. Heinlein’s perspective on sf and some of the methods he used to rework conventional pulp images into a meaningful context of science, politics and literature. Heinlein contributed over thirty novels and nearly sixty short stories to the field of sf, and was the first writer to be awarded the title of “Grand Master” for his lifetime achievements. Evidence from his speeches, letters and essays shows that he believed in the genre’s ability to instruct, and to forward ideas on social change and on progress. At the same time, he protested its tendency to rely on formulas, to disregard known scientific principles, and to lapse into escapism. In The Rolling Stones, Heinlein uses a metafictional structure that allows him to assimilate pulp narratives within a framework of dialogue that explores sf’s increasingly troubled relationship with commercialization and predictable “kitsch” aesthetic models. Additionally, he positions a woman in the role of frontier hero, scientist and pulp sf writer. This move brings into question why these roles have often been reserved for men, and encourages the idea that sf’s visions of the future can be reimagined from a feminist point of view.

Chapter three is committed to a discussion of Eleanor Arnason and her treatment of women in sf. Arnason was given the James Tiptree, Jr. award, which honors thought-provoking fiction that expands or explores the understanding of gender. Her essay “On
the Writing of Science Fiction” reflects on her experience of reading sf when she was young and later struggling to find her voice as a writer in the 1950s and 1960s. She relates that writing sf was a way to feel powerful and express her alienation, but she realized that her early work was unsatisfying because she was unconsciously confined by a history of literary precedents that were set by men. The metafictive structure of Arnason’s short story, “The Warlord of Saturn’s Moons,” allows Arnason to engage ironically with various pulp tropes. It also confronts the emotionally hollow image of the lone hero that was part of the space opera tradition against which she was working.

Chapter four is devoted to Margaret Atwood’s The Blind Assassin, a novel that won the Booker Prize in 2000. The text is an elaborately constructed fictional memoir that boxes together multiple intertextual narratives. Atwood invests the pulp formulas with new emotional significance by using a female narrator to retell a series of stories that originate from a male writer. By filtering the stories through the perspective of a woman, Atwood also shows how powerful female images can be found latent even in male-oriented pulps. Additionally, the metafictive framework of nested stories allows the narrator to repeatedly cross the boundary between fiction and reality. This demonstrates how women use sf to construct a space where they can resist their social circumstances by taking control over their internal lives and imagined futures. Atwood’s essays and interviews on the purpose of writing and the nature of sf reveal that she sees the genre as a means of understanding the imagination and exploring change.

The pulp sf era lasted from the publication of Hugo Gernsback’s Amazing Stories in 1926 through the 1940’s, when market interests shifted towards novels and comic books. The themes were varied: visions of technology that were either marvels or
disasters, encounters with the unknowable “other” that materialized as aliens, and inquiries into the future and the vast nature of the universe. It was during the era of the pulp sf magazines that the genre formulas that still endure were formed; as time passed, they were renewed, complicated, disrupted and intertextualized. The pulps are part of a landscape that Farah Mendelsohn describes as “cumulative:” “Science fiction has come to rely on the evolution of a vocabulary, of a structure and a set of shared ideas which are deeply embedded in the genre’s psyche” (6). Texts are amplified by an awareness of their historical contexts and literary precedents, and each writer in this project has personal experiences from the pulp era that inform the tropes they choose to reconfigure.

Adam Roberts uses the work of golden age writer E. E. “Doc” Smith as an example of the early hero narratives that he calls "discourses of Will.” Doc Smith wrote one of the earliest space operas, Skylark of Space, in 1928, and Roberts and argues that it features “one of the shaping discourses of nineteenth-and-twentieth-century sf . . . a valorization of Will" (History 181). This "will" is "masculinized and configured in warrior terms" (History 180), and exemplified in characters like Edgar Rice Burrough’s John Carter of Mars, who was a soldier and frontiersman. Male heroes were admired for strength, bravery and cleverness, but heroines were expected to be beautiful, compassionate and willing to sacrifice themselves. Mike Ashley maps these male-oriented trends in the pulp sf genre from the invention of the term "scientifiction" in 1926. Ashley explains that at its inception sf was about "gadgets" and science oriented, but that by 1931, "anything with a hero, villain, damsel-in-distress, monster and ray-gun" was popular (70). It was during this era that sf developed a reputation as escapist "low" culture, known for fantastic adventure and titillation. Robert Heinlein remarked: “I have
I have been reading it as long as I could get hold of it, and I probably experienced much the same process most of you did: parental disapproval, those funny looks you get from friends, for reading "that kind of junk." (154). Atwood called the 1930s the “golden age of bug-eyed monsters and girls in brass brassieres” (par. 1 Guardian), and Joanna Russ observed in the early 1970s, "American Science Fiction developed out of the pulps and stayed outside the tradition of serious literature for at least three decades; it is still not really respectable" (82). Ashley explains that SF had to overcome an image described as "wild west stories of the future" (72), but it began to mature after a call in 1931 from the David Lasser, the editor of Wonder Stories, for sf to "deal realistically with the effect . . . of a scientific invention or discovery on people" (73) and another appeal in 1933 from the editor of Astounding, F. Orlin Tremaine, for original "thought variants" (84). Ashley describes an atmosphere where "themes hitherto considered taboo, including sex, feminism, and religion" (73) were discussed; but even by the '50s, Pamela Sargent contends that "It's not entirely a mistaken impression that women's science fiction centered around the hearth and home . . . [and male science fiction writers were] assuming that the mores of the future would not be notably different from those in the United States during the early and middle twentieth century" (10). Among the heroes, the scientists, and the aliens, it is initially difficult to discover the women. Russ is known for her penetrating observation that "There are plenty of images [emphasis mine] of women in science fiction. There are hardly any women" (91). Yet Atwood, Arnason, Heinlein and Moore remind us that women have always been present in science fiction, if sometimes in the margins or under disguise.
Eric Davin explores the contested relationship between women and sf; his exhaustive analysis of magazine letter columns and related artifacts details the nature and participation of the female readership throughout the pulp era. Based on their letters, Davin observes that many women started reading sf as young teens; he cites recollections from influential female writers such as Anne McCaffrey, (1926), Madeleine L’Engle, (1918), and Joanna Russ, (1937), (75-76). There is a common, though waning, perception¹ that women were not interested in early sf; that it was not written for them, or by them. Davin argues that they were welcome in the sf community, and details the experiences of many who wrote letters, were active in the community of readers and authors, and finally ventured to write their own material. Sarah Lefanu notes that: "More than in any other form of fiction there is an easy flow between writers and readers. Professional writers often start off as fans" (5).

Though women may have been accepted within the sf community, society viewed their interest with suspicion. Davin records that “many female fans wrote similar letters saying they had to endure the hostility or ridicule of family or friends in order to enjoy their favorite literature” (77). The provocative pulp cover images were one reason women had difficulty. Davin cites a women who wrote to Thrilling Wonder Stories in 1949: “I still don’t like that knowing leer that comes over the faces of the idle loungers and the characters in attendance every time I pick up this mag . . . Why, oh why, must I be subjected to this when I LOVE you the way that I do?” (80). In response to a female fan who wrote to Planet Stories to say her friends and husband thought she was ‘foolish’ to

¹ Eric Davin reports that 1,947 letters were sent in to the classic “hard sf” pulp magazine Astounding from 1930 – 1960, and of these, 111 writers were identifiable as women, representing just under 7 percent (75).
read sf, another woman replies, “She and I are in the same boat, only MY friends and husband don’t think I am foolish for reading sf; they think I’m nuts!” (77). Heinlein was proud of the genre’s outsider status: “We here, the science fiction fans, are the lunatic fringe! We are the crazy fools who read . . . those magazines with the outlandish machines and animals on the covers . . . Those who are not fans ask you if you really read that stuff, and from then on they look at you with suspicion (Requiem 154). In 1960, Kingsley Amis published New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction. In a chapter on the “unconscious” in sf and fantasy, Amis considers whether the readers are psychologically balanced; he writes, “the impression lingers that a good look through the mailing lists of the fantasy magazines would amply repay anybody setting up in business as an analyst” (58). Mainstream culture seems convinced that involvement with sf constitutes transgressive behavior; perhaps they distrust its discourse of change and sense that sf questions their assumptions about nature and reality.
II. SPEAKING FROM NORTHWEST: THE VOICES OF CATHERINE L. MOORE

Catherine L. Moore was born in 1911 and began reading sf during the Great Depression. In a spontaneous moment, bored with dull secretarial exercises, she began to write her first sf story when she was 22. Moore recalls her initiation into the worlds of sf; “I first discovered science fiction, via *Amazing* magazine, at a local newsstand . . .

[*Amazing*] stood out like a sore thumb. Actually, it was a great act of daring on my part to buy *Amazing*. My parents, who had very definite ideas about literature, didn’t approve of ‘trashy’ fiction” (*Pulp* 45). The cover illustrations were a source of both fascination and anxiety for women. Moore uses the term “daring,” which indicates that she was willing to deliberately transgress against social codes in order to discover a new experience. Like many of the women who wrote in to the pulp letter columns and told stories of how they endured the disapproval of family, friends, and the public in order to read sf, Moore too, went against the wishes of her family, and remembers that “Science fiction was very much a despised genre. My mother was literally horrified by the thought that I was reading this ‘trash’” (*Pulp* 46). Though she cites practical reasons, Moore chose to write under the relative anonymity of her ambiguously gendered pen name (C. L. Moore) and adopted the perspective of a masculine narrator for many of her stories.²

² Moore is one of several women who used anonymity or a masculine pen name to disguise their writing in the field of sf. Mary Shelley first published *Frankenstein* anonymously, and used the narrative guise of Victor Frankenstein to explore nature’s mysteries and the secrets of creation. Nearly two centuries later, Alice Sheldon adopted the name “James Tiptree, Jr.” because she was shy, and because she suspected that “the news that I wrote science fiction would have been the crowning blow to my respectability” (50) at her university.
Shambleau is Moore’s first published story, and the hero (or anti-hero), Northwest Smith, makes his premier appearance on its pages, arriving grey-eyed and dangerous, a smuggler known less for chivalry than stealth. Shambleau’s preface explains that men once traveled the stars in times past, and warns that the ancient myths of monsters like Medusa have truth rooted in those ages. The real story starts with the image of an alien girl as she flees an outraged mob across the dusty red streets of a Martian landscape. Smith, mystified by the crowd’s hostility and disgust, comes to her defense and diffuses their violence by claiming her as his own, for she is “a girl, and sweetly made and in danger” (18). The mob calls her “Shambleau,” and though her speech is limited, she understands and accepts his offer of shelter while he conducts business in town. Shambleau is a kind of psychic vampire, a mesmerizing Medusa figure, and her carefully bound red hair is revealed to be a mass of tentacles that lengthen and bind her victims in an intimate and addictive connection, draining them of life and will. Smith, who is normally dispassionate and resolute, is horrified to discover her true nature but is nonetheless seduced and overcome. He is saved only by the intervention of his Venusian partner, Yarol, and in the end Smith is left uncertain that he would be able to resist another Shambleau, should he ever find one.

Moore found the pulp market to be completely accessible. As a medium of mass culture, the pulps were interested in anything that would sell. The writers were not subject to the kind of scrutiny that “serious” literary editors and critics turned on their authors. Though it was her first submission, Shambleau sold to Weird Tales immediately. When asked years later if it was a challenge to publish in the sf market because she was a woman, Moore replied, “There was nothing to it. I wrote ‘Shambleau’ and sold it with
little difficulty” (*Pulp* 46), and she recalled that during her career as a writer she “never felt the least bit downed because I was a woman” (*Pulp* 47). She explained in various interviews that she used her initials simply because it was the Depression era and she suspected that the bank she worked at would fire her if they knew she had a second source of income. Writing sf gave Moore an increased agency in a very practical sense; in a time of extreme financial crisis, she had the potential to make more money. She describes her ecstatic reaction to the first check: “I screamed at the top of my lungs . . . I was out of my mind with joy!” (*Pulp* 47). Not only could Moore break into the sf market because its borders went unpoliced, but it also gave her a small measure of fiscal independence from her parents and from her total reliance on the institutions of business and industry where she had limited influence and value.³

Andreas Huyssen’s ideas about the connection between women and mass culture can help explain why Moore had access to this market. Huyssen believes that early twentieth century “aesthetic discourse genders mass culture as feminine” (47), and describes pulp fiction as “the discourse that persistently associated women with mass culture” (49). He argues that “woman is positioned as reader of inferior literature . . . [and] such positioning of women as avid consumers of pulp . . . also affects the woman writer” (46). Eric Davin further explains why stories by women who wrote sf were welcome: “the actual *practice* of science fiction partakes more of the nature of popular culture than of the professionalized nature of science . . . it is much more democratic and open to participation by outsider groups than institutionalized professional fields, like science” (43). While women may have been viewed with

³ Nevertheless, she referred to writing as a “hobby.”
Moore uses myth and history to give her fantastic narrative some cultural legitimacy, creating a plausible narrative bridge between myth, history and speculation. She intertextualizes her story with elements from classical mythology, the American frontier mythos, and conventions from space operas and scientific romances. This elaborate embedding captures a cultural resonance that she then reconfigures and subverts to include a perspective that challenges “official” interpretations of history and myth. Moore acts immediately to locate her text within these traditions in Shambleau’s brief preface:

Man has conquered Space before . . . There have been too many myths and legends for us to doubt it . . . That tale of the snake-haired Gorgon, whose gaze turned the gazer to stone, never originated about any creature that Earth nourished. And those ancient Greeks who told the story must have remembered, dimly and half believing, a tale of antiquity about some strange being from one of the outlying planets their remotest ancestors once trod (17).

Moore is clear about her intention to rewrite their stories. Virginia Woolf speculated that women have a place in history that has gone unrecorded, asking “why should they not add a supplement to history . . . one often catches a glimpse of them in the lives of the great” (45). Moore confiscated a place in those histories for her own use. Thomas Bredehoft notes her authoritative voice: “She tells a tale of appropriation rather than marginalization, one which figures her power as central, authorial, productive; she

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4 Davin claims that “no woman in early science fiction had to write under a male byline to see her story in print” (99) and cites that his research shows “Out of a total of 65 female authors published during our 1926-1949 period, the record reveals only three instances . . . of a female writer using a male pseudonym at all” (99).
counters one originary narrative with another” (383). By countering established historical and literary narratives, Moore disputes the authority of the social institutions that gave those narratives cultural legitimacy.

Her assertive reinterpretations of patriarchal narratives even includes the biblical story of man’s creation in Eden; in 1940, Moore published *The Fruit of Knowledge*, an alternative account of the Fall told from Lilith’s perspective. “Without the existence of such as Lilith, the balance of creation might tip over” (*Best* 177). Moore is alert to the continuous transference between culture and writing and in interviews advised aspiring authors to provide themselves with diverse reference material: “read a great deal of the works you enjoy most. Much of it will be useless. But the trusty unconscious can be relied on to make lots of unseen notes” (*Best* 307). Moore describes how the impulse that began *Shambleau* emerged from her knowledge of literature and her own resistance to the mindless tedium of the repetitive exercises she practiced to become a proficient typist:

> halfway down a sheet of yellow paper otherwise filled up with boring quick-brown-foxes . . . I began fragments remembered from sophomore English . . . Keats, Browning, Byron . . . I discovered myself typing something about a ‘red, running figure.’ I looked at it a while, my mind a perfect blank, and then shifted mental gears . . . swinging with idiot confidence into the first lines of the story which ended up as *Shambleau*. (*Best* 206)

Bredehoft positions Moore as an example of Donna Harraway’s conceptualized “cyborg”; he explains that Moore began as a human automaton able to transition from reproducing text (a typist) to a “cyborg” who creates texts (a writer). In his argument, Moore “takes the tools of her business-world job and remembered fragments of (dead white male) literature and creates something new out of them, in one quick transition appropriating both the tools and the texts of the Depression-era business world and the
academy in order to re-invent herself (377). By borrowing and adapting narratives for her own use, Moore created a space to contest representations of women in history and myth. She includes the narrative configurations of the sf pulps in her revised topography. In Shambleau, the sf motif of the woman in peril (an image that graced many of the pulp magazine covers) is disrupted by the persecuted girl’s destructive but irresistible monstrosity. Moore shows a female alien neither destroyed nor tamed by the hero. The hero survives but does not prevail, for Shambleau’s influence lingers in Smith’s desire.

Moore creates her own territory from borrowed landscapes. Once she has remade them to her taste, she is able to occupy the space with projections of her own persona. Like Eleanor Arnason, who says that she writes characters “full of my emotions,” Moore once explained that she located her self in her different creations:

If you have read past Shambleau to Jirel, you will probably have noticed what a close relationship the two women bear to one another . . . unconsciously, no doubt, both were versions of the self I’d like to have been. . . . The unconscious works in a mysterious way, doesn’t it? (I have just glanced at my Unconscious to see if the tribute was noticed. It wasn’t. He has fitted himself into the image of a large black cat and is preening his left shoulder and ignoring me. (Best 308)"

It is telling that Moore refers to her unconscious as a male and that she ascribes catlike characteristics to both Smith and Shambleau (Smith is known to walk like a cat, and Shambleau has cat eyes, claws and “kitten” teeth). Moore does not limit her projected selves to a single gender or position in the story. This landscape liberates Moore from cultural expectations that restrict her desire for knowledge and experiences in her real, or socially constructed life. Moore even signals that her story takes place where normal

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5 Moore reaffirms this explanation in a later interview. She explains that she and her husband constructed their stories “from the viewpoint of characters who were more or less like ourselves” (PV 47).
cultural standards might not apply; Shambleau tells Smith, “Light and – dark – they are alike – to me” (31) and describes herself as “from far – from long ago” (11). The implication is that the normal binary of good and evil are unsuited to Shambleau, an alien distant in time and space from the codes of behavior that govern humanity. Her strangeness appears, at times, to be enviable.

Susan Gubar writes that "Moore implies that Shambleau might represent a separate female culture that is beyond our known words and worlds " (19). Moore certainly conceives of the alien female as privileged, possessing “dark knowledge” (23). The hero Smith notes that there is “something queenly in the pose of her” (22). Shambleau regards Smith’s attempts to look after her with a disturbing “gleam of strange amusement” (29), and when Smith tries to understand her nature, he perceives “dark, animal wisdom . . . that look of the beast which sees more than man” (22). Shambleau is both dangerous and lovely: “he was conscious of the brown, soft curves of her, velvety. . . .Vampire she might be, unhuman she certainly was, but desirable beyond words” (33). Her knowledge also is unique; though Smith is repulsed by her influence on him, he struggles with his desire to share her insight, recalling their embrace: “I saw things – and knew things – horrible, wild things I can’t quite remember – visited unbelievable places, look backward through the memory of that – creature – I was one with . . . God, I wish I could remember!” (47). His friend Yarol wants to reduce the Shambleau to something less than human, but Moore presents her as empathic, with an ability to connect deeply to her sometimes willing victims. Davin speculates that “presenting the alien as female was the best way to present a powerful female image. It was a subversive reinterpretation of the millennia-old male tradition of presenting the
female as alien” (218). Davin admits that not all female pulp writers were subverting genre tropes or engaging in any kind of “social speculation” (214), but concludes that their own “‘alien’ status was one reason why early women science fiction writers, as a group, brought and empathic an more fully conceived dimension to their descriptions of people, relationships, and most especially, aliens” (220).

Moore initially relocated herself through the fiction she read. The sf pulps allowed her to travel beyond the realistic boundaries imposed by her gender, social and economic circumstances. There were multiple cultural establishments operating to control her behavior - her family had very definite ideas about the kinds of literature that were appropriate for a young woman, and the bank where she worked was “a very paternalistic organization” (Pulp 47). She was also denied the empowerment of finishing her education and cultivating her intellectual life at the university (she left in her sophomore year) because of the dire economics of the Depression. Reading was a means for her to resist. Moore explains that “I paid very little attention to the writers per se. What interested me were the stories. Reading science fiction was a grand, glorious adventure, a new way of looking at the world and sharing in exciting new adventures” (Pulp 46). What she read became part of her own experience; she “shared” in the adventures because she saw the boundary between physical and intellectual life as permeable.

Postmodern theorist Brian McHale observes that advanced industrial cultures are “characterized by the frequency and density of ‘escape attempts’ in normal, everyday life” and, he argues, “one of the features of this ontological landscape is its permeation by secondary realities” (38). Ontological shifts into other worlds gave Moore an alternative to the unrelieved oppressions of everyday life, which she used to exercise her curiosity
and imagination. Moore was aware that sf might not have the status or quality of the canonical literature she was exposed to in her brief year at the university, but she chose the genre specifically for its transportive properties: “I didn’t read science fiction for its literary qualities. I just loved the stories, the fact that they took me out of myself and my narrow little world” (*Pulp* 45-46). She aligns literal and figurative ideas of traveling across worlds to the point of interchangeability: “I should think that any middle-class girl, reared as I was in middle America, would have been enormously grateful for the opportunity to go to Mars. I certainly was” (*Pulp* 46). SF gave her access to places otherwise out of reach. When she transforms from an engaged reader into a writer with control, her desire to transcend still motivates her. Moore explains that: “Writing becomes totally compulsive after a while. It’s a delightful feeling. You get completely out of yourself” (*Pulp* 49). In *Shambleau*, Moore lingers over several passages the describe Smith’s extensive travels. He is observed “engaging in idle conversation with men of all races and worlds, usually in their own languages, for Smith was a linguist of repute among his contemporaries. He heard the gossip of the spaceways, news from a dozen planets of a thousand different events” (30). Writing *Shambleau* allows Moore to participate in these extended experiences.

Moore, who delighted in travel to new worlds and unconsciously created “versions” of her self, incarnated her identity in characters that crossed gender, spatial and social boundaries. Her affinity for fragmenting the self in order to occupy different

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6 Bredehoft points out that some of the critical work done on Moore and *Shambleau* concludes that the story “dramatizes ‘not only the male imperative to murder the alien female, but also the female author's culturally conditioned self-loathing’ (Gilbert and Gubar 102)” (370). However, in context with Moore’s remarks on how liberating she found sf to be, and her evident admiration of Shambleau’s power and mysterious knowledge, it is possible to construct a positive feminist reading.
“leisure ontologies” is a kind of purposeful schizophrenia found in postindustrial cultures. McHale comments on the degree to which this splitting can occur: “These ‘escapes’ from the world of paramount reality range from mental strategies of ironic disengagement . . . to mass media entertainment . . . to the extreme of radical escapes . . . [and] ultimately, schizophrenia” (38). She displaces her identity on three levels, once as “C. L. Moore” the androgynous author, as the voice of a male narrator, and as the alien Shambleau. These three screens - anonymity, gender, and alienness – enable her to venture into new worlds. By apprehending Smith’s persona of a feared and admired iconoclast in a space where “living was a perilous affair outside the law and rules by the ray-gun only” (25) she shares in his agency, and is able to act with total autonomy within the text. Northwest Smith is fiercely masculinized, a “tall Earthman in the space-explorer’s leathern garb, all one color from the burning of savage suns save for the sinister pallor of his no-colored eyes in a scarred and resolute face, gun in his steady hand” (18-19). Each of his features suggests strength, fearlessness, a capacity for violence, and a purposeful will. Even Moore suspects that she does not have total control over him; at his creation, she claims, “Northwest Smith strolled onstage without even a glance my way, perfectly sure of what he was going to do” (Best 307). His status as an outlaw and morally ambiguous adult male who operates outside of the dominant cultural institutions that commonly sanction her reality allows Moore the opportunity enact transgressive behaviors.

Moore locates Shambleau on the frontier, a space where the normalizing codes of civilization are not enforced. She foreshadows Smith’s illicit encounter with the

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7 According to McHale, the term “leisure ontologies” was created by Thomas Pavel.
bewitching alien by specifying that “Lakkdarol was anything but a puritan town” (21). Moore directly connects the Martian town to the frontier mythos by referring it a “camptown” and explaining that “Lakkdarol roars by night, as Earthmen’s camptowns have a way of doing on every planet where Earth’s outposts are” (25). Bredehoft identifies “The setting of the story [Shambleau] on the Martian frontier . . . [as] an instance of the common science-fictional trope of relocating narratives of the American "old West" on other worlds. . . . In such a context, the smuggler Smith corresponds to the heroic loner cowboy” (373). Moore infused her work with a sensuality and emotion exceptional in her own time or any other. She used the framework of sf tropes to explore internal experiences instead of becoming preoccupied with gadgets or embattled knights in space suits. She described her stories as “highly romantic, extremely serious, and loaded with lots of color and drama” (Pulp 48). When asked why the themes of love and romance were neglected by the other sf pulp writers of the period, she responded that “there was little room in the science fiction story for love or human feelings. The science fiction that was being written then was, to a great extent, mass-produced formula writing. It was being written by people whose background was primarily in the sciences” (Pulp 47). Moore uses some of the same models, but her language and conceptual explorations are more sophisticated. Shambleau is dense with feeling and immersive sensuality. Smith describes one of his encounters with the alien “Medusa” as “a perilous delight – beyond physical pleasure, deeper than joy of the mind . . . caressing the very roots of his soul . . . [and] with that knowledge a horror broke on him, turning the pleasure into a rapture of revulsion” (28).
Moore married sf writer Henry Kuttner in 1940 and began working with him on stories. As she explained her role in their collaboration: “Hank and I felt that my contribution was in terms of characters. I brought a certain texture of sensory detail to our characters, which didn’t particularly interest Hank . . . Hank dealt more with visual externals . . . I dealt more with inner feelings” (Pulp 49). Though Northwest Smith is depicted as a ray-gun wielding outlaw (“Smith and Yarol and the Maid were a trinity that had caused the Patrol leaders much worry and many gray hairs in the past” [25]), dramatized scenes of action and violence are mostly absent from her work, providing a nondescript background for the heart of her stories. With phrases like: “Smith’s errand in Lakkdarol, like most of his errands, is better not spoken of” (25) or “Smith went down among the awakening lights toward the center of town. His business there does not concern us” (25), Moore repeatedly assures the reader that the “adventurous” elements take place between Smith and Shambleau.

Moore subverted and re-conceptualized the sf pulp formulas of the maiden in distress to see and experience things otherwise forbidden to her. Her thoughts and experiences with sf align closely with the fictionalized pulp sf writers that Atwood and Arnason would write about decades later. Moore conceived of herself as an inhabitant of the worlds she read about and created. She was an adventurer, bold enough to engage her voice in a dialogue with the myths of the Greeks, the religion of the Judeo-Christians, the history of the Old West, and the traditions of popular sf.
III. SELLING THE SPACEWAYS: PULP TRADITIONS IN ROBERT HEINLEIN’S

*THE ROLLING STONES*

Robert A. Heinlein was born in 1907 and published his first sf story in 1939. He had a passion for science, and though he was realistic about the quality of pulp literature, he believed the genre had the potential to change the future. In a speech he addressed to the World Science Fiction Convention in 1941, ten years before he wrote *The Rolling Stones*, he outlines why sf is important: “I think that the corniest tripe published in a science fiction magazine (and some of it isn't too hot, we know that; some of my stuff isn't so hot) beats all of the . . . *Gone With the Wind*’s that were ever published, because at least it does include that one distinctly human-like attempt to predict the future” (*Requiem* 160). He worked on the problem of how to make sf better and was deeply critical of the pulp tradition.

*The Rolling Stones* was published in 1952, approximately thirteen years after Heinlein submitted his first story to *Astounding Science-Fiction*. The novel is generally reviewed in positive terms for its humor and strong female role models, but it was written for young adults and compared with his controversial novels for adults there is a lack of critical scholarship on the text. The novel occupies an ambiguous and unusual position between straightforward space exploration, young adult fiction, and self-aware sf metacommentary. It pairs serious scientific principles and speculation with embedded space opera narrative. Most of the central themes (such as personal liberty) are addressed
in Heinlein’s other novels, but this text uses a metafictional narrative structure. The story occupies the space between science and sensationalism, a transitional work that maps the changes from the “sense of wonder” that informs early pulp narrative to the responsibilities of adulthood that drive more ambitious speculative fiction.

*The Rolling Stones* is the story of an adventuresome family that is frustrated with the increasing bureaucracy on the moon and decides to emigrate. They travel to Mars, then beyond to the asteroid belt, and finally turn towards Saturn. The father, Roger Stone, is an engineer and pilot, the former mayor of Luna, and the creator and reluctant writer of a popular space opera serial, *The Scourge of the Spaceways*, which is televised on earth. The grandmother, Hazel Stone, is one of the original lunar colonists, and an astrogation engineer, pilot, and political activist who takes over writing her son's adventure serial when he grows bored with it. She works out story ideas with the help of her five-year-old grandson, Buster, and the occasional input of his older twin brothers, the teenage entrepreneurs Castor and Pollux Stone. Their mother is a medical doctor, and their sister, Meade Stone, an aspiring pilot. The "marathon adventure serial" (29) chronicles the adventures of a hero, John Sterling, and is like other space operas vast in scope and “mayhem.” Roger is sick of retreading the same tired formulas, but Hazel is enthusiastic about renewing the story on a grander scale and using the proceeds to fund their travels. Heinlein critiques pulp culture as Hazel and Roger verbally spar about the content and quality of the scripts.

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8 Most of Heinlein’s late novels likewise parody pulp sf and are set in a “metaverse.”
9 A term originating in the 1940’s to describe the appeal of science fiction.
Heinlein here assigns roles to future women not yet commonly available to them in his day. The Rolling Stones implicitly rebukes the roles women were confined to by both the sf and scientific community. Heinlein creates a place for these talented women in his fiction, arguing that “science fiction, even the corniest of it, even the most outlandish of it, no matter how badly it's written, has a distinct therapeutic value because all of it has as its primary postulate that the world does change” (Requiem 157). The women in The Rolling Stones are intelligent, capable, and accomplished, yet still committed to their family. They practice medicine, engineering, astrogation, art and law, and are adept at politics and business. Heinlein locates them on the frontiers of space, away from institutions that perpetuate cultural biases. Hazel stopped working as an engineer for the government on Luna because she “saw three big, hairy, male men promoted over my head and not one of them could do a partial integration without a pencil. Presently I figured out that the Atomic Energy Commission had a bias on the subject of women no matter what the civil service rules said” (24). Hazel is practical and determined to take care of her family, so she is willing to pander to an audience that likes blood to finance her passion for exploring: “If we are going to do a cometary for Saturn instead of a tangential for Earth, it's back to the salt mines for me. I'll radio New York for an advance, then I'll go wake Lowell [Buster] and we'll start shoveling gore.” She argues that her adolescent granddaughter would have more opportunities in the asteroids, asserting that even the private sector is guilty of discrimination: “I've taught Meade all the astrogation I know, She could get a job with Four-Planets tomorrow if they weren't so stuffy about hiring female pilots” (285). Hazel never bothers to tell the network that she has taken over authorship of The Scourge of the Spaceways, nor does she take any public
credit, but writes better material. Hazel even proves to write better material – her scripts increase the revenues, and the contract is renewed for multiple seasons.

The frontier spirit is an important motif in sf history, and there is a correspondence between the mythos of the American West that powered the space operas and the feminist desire for freedom and agency.¹⁰ *The Rolling Stones* celebrates the frontier because it is where individuals can be free of government, bureaucracy and other confining social institutions.¹¹ Hazel is committed to the ideals of personal freedom embodied by the frontier and she is willing to fight for them. She carries a gun “To assert my right. Besides, I might meet a rattlesnake” (35) and in another scene she says: “I know there is free speech on the Moon: I wrote it into the charter myself” (21). In his radio address for the show, *This I Believe,*¹² Heinlein expressed his commitment to the promised frontier of space:

I believe in my whole race . . . I am proud to be a human being. I believe that . . . this animal barely up from the apes will endure. Will endure longer than his home planet -- will spread out to the stars and beyond, carrying with him his honesty and his insatiable curiosity, his unlimited courage and his noble essential decency. *(This I Believe 286)*

Hazel believes in discovery for its own sake, explaining her desire to see Saturn and the asteroid belt: “I've never seen the Rings. That's reason enough to go anywhere. The race

¹⁰ Per John Clute’s *Encyclopedia of Science fiction* entry on the frontier, “The pulp magazines inherited from the dime novels . . . a "mythologized" version of the USA's recent past in the Western genre, which glorified the "frontier spirit" . . . [and] became the animating force of countless stories about the exploration of the Solar System and the colonization of other worlds.”

¹¹ Carl Abbot identifies Heinlein’s landscape in *The Rolling Stones* as a “Type I” frontier, referring to displaced individuals “who travel from one locale to another to harvest easily accessible natural resources. These are boom-and-bust frontiers that attract disproportionate numbers of young men” (246)

¹² The show *This I Believe*, first broadcast in 1951, records “the personal philosophies of thoughtful men and women in all walks of life” (NPR).
has been doing it for all time. The dull ones stay home — and the bright ones stir around and try to see what trouble they can dig up. It's the human pattern” (285-286).

This novel conflates two different expectations of the imagined experience of space travel. The visions of the pulp serials are full of galactic-scale adventure; the heroes are bold, the aliens strange, the villains terrible. The images from *The Scourge of the Spaceways* are vivid with mysterious “space entities,” “methane monsters,” silicon-based “Arthurian prisoners,” “mindrays,” and the menace of an implacable “Galactic Overlord.” The plot is bloody and romantic, and space is conquered through will and the ingenuity of a solitary hero, a matter of “superhuman” effort, echoing Adam Roberts’ claim that the 1930s space operas were “discourses of will” (*History* 180). There is a cavalier attitude toward plausibility, and the compelling narratives rely on an audience’s short attention span and uncritical appreciation. Roger expresses skepticism about one of Hazel’s improbable stories:

[. . .] you had also left Our Hero in a decidedly untenable position. Sealed in a radioactive sphere, if I remember correctly, at the bottom of an ammonia ocean on Jupiter. The ocean was swarming with methane monsters . . . hypnotized by the Overlord's mindray to go after John Sterling at the first whiff — and him armed only with his Scout knife. How did you get him out of it?

[Hazel:] “Nothing to it, Roger. By dint of superhuman effort Our Hero extricated himself from his predicament.” (118)

Linda Hutcheon asks, “Is it somehow fine to be ‘behaving in a stereotypical way’ (Madonna, in McClary 1991:149) as long as you are ‘masterminding it’” (35). Heinlein uses this passage to parody the excesses of pulp narratives, but he also colludes in perpetuating them. The story benefits from the thrill of a few embedded snapshots from
the space opera that are conveniently liberated from the normal narrative constraints of continuity or logic, yet retains the privilege of criticizing the tropes it has borrowed.

The story of the Stone family, however, shows a different side of interplanetary adventure. There are no archenemies, no malicious aliens, only the frustrations of ever-expanding bureaucracies, limitations of money, unpredictable illnesses, and the fatal consequences of carelessness. Roger Stone points out that “the tiniest of errors at blast-off had a quarter of a million miles in which to multiply” (95). The Martians are barely distinguishable as such – the Stone family encounters one alien, Captain Thomas, who is a pilot and a Martian, and “Meade thought privately that he looked more like a bookkeeper than a dashing spaceman” (154). Much to the Stones’s disappointment, Mars is dull and tedious; bureaucratic impediments and unscrupulous landlords complicate the visit. Heinlein’s descriptions emphasize that the most essential and rigorous aspect of travelling across space is the meticulous planning required to survive - the details of provisioning, calculating trajectories, disease prevention and maintaining health, meeting expenses, developing interpersonal relationships, and educating children who will have few connections to Earth. The greatest danger is the indifference and vastness of space.

Heinlein insists on scientific accuracy in his fiction. He reprimands writers who neglect the implicit responsibility they have to their readers to be educated: “there are a lot of people trying to write science fiction who haven’t bothered to learn anything about science. . . . You owe it to your readers to . . . bone up on the field of science you intend

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13 Donna Williams concludes that he has a deep mistrust of humans acting in mass; “Heinlein agrees that the minute you think you have attained liberty, there it goes. Small minds, creeping bureaucracy, and-his ultimate dirty word-Government spring up like weeds and begin to choke out independent thinking” (170).

to introduce in your story” (*Worlds* 18). Obliquely, he demonstrates how even the most outrageous narratives can be embedded with useful ideas and become learning experiences. When Roger Stone commends his twin sons for the plan that prevents their grandmother and brother from being lost in space, Castor gives Hazel credit: “it was an idea that we got out of her serial . . . about how to sort out one piece of space from another when you don't have too much data to go on” (281). Science is in the bones of his story, and Heinlein teaches his readers through direct explanations (*The Rolling Stones* is filled with long passages on science and math), demonstrations, and through extensive literary references. Hazel uses classic literature, including Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*, for plots: "Next week I’m going to equip *Hamlet* with atomic propulsion and stir it in with *The Comedy of Errors* " (30). Roger also mentions being inspired by ideas from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* and Homer, and John Sterling is referred to as a “Galahad,” presumably from the Arthurian legend. Like Catherine Moore and Margaret Atwood, Hazel and Roger use their mythic and literary knowledge to reinvent formulas, collapsing high-culture narratives from history, science and literature into the low-culture pulp fiction.

Heinlein voices in the novel his objections to issues that have historically troubled sf, especially the temptation of a rapid payoff versus the desire to produce innovative work that disrupts the audience’s expectation of what Matei Calinescu describes as “effortless enjoyment.” The writing process is foregrounded as the construction of a consumable product. Pulp sf is often charged as formulaic and “escapist,” with characteristics similar to the superficial aesthetic experiences of “kitsch,” or any consumable art meant to enable “wish-fulfillment” without provoking critical thought.
Calinescu explains the appeal of such experiences: “[kitsch] has the function . . . of providing an illusionary escape from the banality and meaninglessness of contemporary day-to-day life” (251). Consumers are comfortable with formulas and the predictability of kitsch, and Calinescu observes that some “artists” are willing to work for “a well-defined audience of average consumers, [and to] apply a definite sets of rules and communicate varieties of highly predictable messages in stereotyped ‘aesthetic’ packages” (249) to ensure continued profitability. The audience is passive and unreflective; the “formulas” serve only to reinforce the values of the culture industry that profits from them. Entertainment is the driving principle and writers are excused from the demands of plausibility and originality. In her scripts, Hazel is unscrupulous about thrilling the audience with scenes “so fast . . . and so bloody that our unseen audience doesn't have time to think” (121). When Roger objects to her strategy of introducing a supervillain, he counters, “Galactic Overlords' . . . It's not only preposterous; it's been used over and over again” (30). Roger describes a system that rewards sensationalism and encourages writers to stay with proven formulas, admitting that “[he] had gotten himself caught in a quicksand of fat checks and options” (25). When Roger negotiates turning over The Scourge of the Spaceways to Hazel, he reserves the satisfaction of writing Sterling’s final death scene. Stone has plainly become hostile towards his own creation: “I've hated that mealy-mouthed Galahad [John Sterling] ever since I thought him up. I'm not going to let anyone else have the fun of killing him” (34). In a letter to John W. Campbell, Jr., the editor of Astounding Science Fiction, Heinlein protested the endless reiterations of these

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15 Calinescu elaborates on the link between art or media-kitsch and literature, “the type of artistic experience provided by the media becomes eventually a norm for all artistic experience in the eyes of the conditioned consumer of our time. Literature is also supposed to fit into that pattern, so that gifted writers, in order not to lose their readers, resort to pop techniques and try to become best-selling authors” (256).
pulp formulas and the demand to escalate the drama: “I will not attempt to pep up my stories by introducing a greater degree of action-adventure . . . I have continually enlarged the field of sf and changed it from gadget motivation to stories more subtle in their themes and more realistically motivated. . . [I] completely abandoned the hero-and-villain formula (Grumbles 13-14). Heinlein is criticizing a market that rewards predictable, superficial retellings of the tropes and narratives that have the potential to forward new ideas about exploration, change and otherness.

Heinlein’s criticism is not reserved solely for the writers and the industry; it is also directed at sf’s fan base. Heinlein once lauded sf readers, and in the early years of his career, he spoke well of them: “I've known a good many science fiction fans, and I've observed, statistically, certain things about them. Most of them are young as compared with other groups, most of them are extremely precocious - quite brilliant” (159). But The Rolling Stones makes repeated jibes at their indifference to plausibility, their susceptibility to marketing gimmicks, their taste for bloodshed and the generally low expectations of quality. Roger connects the excess of substandard material to the rise of consumerism and pointless merchandizing, calling it "poor fiction . . . hokum, dreamed up to sell merchandise." (23). When Hazel plans a new story, she recruits her grandson and quips “I get my best ideas from Lowell [Buster]; he's just the mental age of my average audience.” Roger retorts, “If I were Buster, I would resent that”(119). The pointed jibe is directed at a television audience amused by material that would hardly challenge a bright child. Calinescu observes that “a largely unified audience has emerged, whose tastes and emotional needs are skillfully manipulated by the techniques of mass culture” (256); he describes adults who, “unable to cope with the strains and complexities
of modern life; escape via kitsch” (256). These are not the “brilliant” fans Heinlein hoped to reach; they are simply consumers.
IV. TEA WITH THE WARLORD: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ELEANOR ARNASON

Fictional depictions of female sf writers are rare, but one of the most entertaining examples is found in Eleanor Arnason's “The Warlord of Saturn's Moons” (1974). The story is a satire in which a writer's solitary life sometimes blurs into her heroine's epic adventures on Titan, one of Saturn’s distant moons. The narrator describes her typical day:

I light up a cigar and settle down to write another chapter of The Warlord of Saturn's Moons. A filthy habit, you say, though I’m not sure if you're referring to smoking cigars or writing science fiction. True . . . but both activities are pleasurable, and we maiden ladies lead lives that are notoriously short on pleasure.

So, I go back to the domes of Titan and my red-headed heroine deathraying down the warlord's minions . . . Even on paper it gets a lot of hostility out of you, so that your nights aren't troubled by dreams of murder. (34-35)

Writing sf, like smoking cigars, is regarded as an uncivilized but sensual experience normally reserved for men, but the narrator announces her intention to appropriate these pleasures.

Arnason explains why she herself initially found sf compelling:

It was a relief to turn to a kind of fiction that didn’t bore me and didn’t make me feel like a victim. Science fiction heroes overcame witch hunters and crypto-fascists. They survived the bomb. They moved through the glowing ruins of Earth with competence. (Women 102; emphasis added)

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16 Others include Jack McDevitt’s Ancient Shores, 1996, which features Ursula Le Guin as a character, and Robert Sawyer’s Mindscan, 2005, with a character named Karen Bessarian.
Consequently, Arnason’s narrator, who is distressed by the escalating reports of murder, war and pollution that are headlined relentlessly in her newspaper, remarks that “I’m far better off on Titan with [emphasis mine] my heroine, who is better able to deal with her problems than I am to deal with mine” (36). The red-headed protagonist can take action, and through her, the narrator can share in her champion’s agency. The heroine is a woman determined to try and save her world from the Warlord’s tyranny, very different from the narrator, who has no such power as she witnesses toxic smoke pouring from a nearby building and thinks: “I should call the Air Control number and complain. . . . But it takes a peculiar kind of person to keep on being public spirited after it becomes obvious it’s futile” (42). The concern for her environment is trivialized even in her own mind as a “complaint,” not as activism, indicating that she feels her voice goes unheard. Still, she finds ways to resists the forces hinted at by the fear-mongering media and the encroaching industrialized landscape. She grows plants to improve the air, keeps her living space clean and takes care to be well groomed. Through her writing, she constructs an internal domain where her desires have consequences. Denying objective reality is her gesture of resistance.

The style and structure of The Warlord of Saturn’s Moons contributes as much as the plot. Two narratives are nested and the embedded story shares its name with Arnason’s title. It is unclear whose story is being told. Characters are archetypes: the “silver-haired maiden lady” and the “red-headed heroine;” the male protagonist has a number, “409.” The boundaries between the real world and the space opera are repeatedly brought into question. The narrator’s internal monologue, which describes her day as she writes and goes about her domestic routine, is seamlessly embedded with
passages from her fiction. Her reality creates resonances in her story: “A pursuer’s sledge goes over a precipice and, as my heroine hears his long shriek on her radio, my tea kettle starts shrieking” (35). There are constant transitions from the domestic minutiae of making tea or the rituals of bathing and then back onto the embattled snowscapes of Titan. The narrative structure itself makes it difficult to determine exactly when reality transmutes into fiction, as the reader witnesses the creation of a continuous, inhabited internal landscape. This world is partially created by the narrator’s desire to realize ambitions from her childhood (she mentions wanting to join the space patrol).

The theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explain the generative nature of the relationship between desire and reality: “the real object can be produced only by an external causality and external mechanisms; nonetheless this knowledge does not prevent us from believing in the intrinsic power of desire to create its own object [emphasis mine] – if only in an unreal, hallucinatory, or delirious form . . . The reality of the object, insofar as it is produced by desire, is thus a psychic reality” (25). In the context of Arnason’s story, the fictional world imagined through the text is where physical accomplishment, beauty and adventure become real. These real and fictional worlds both have value – the narrator does not neglect one in favor of the other (recall her attention to her plants and her well-kept home). Arnason appears to value this duality:

I still write [science fiction] in order to understand my life . . . I am still fascinated by the wonders of technology . . . terrified of the dangers. I still write to escape boredom and despair. But I want my escape to be temporary. I want my fiction to lead . . . back to the reality of everyday life. (Women 105)

Arnason, like her maiden narrator, writes to take control and shape her own experiences. Tom Brennan, a critic who gives Arnason’s narrator the clever appellation
of “Silver,” believes that “Silver’s space-opera/kitchen filter is . . . a semi-permeable membrane, as indicated by the newscasts that regularly seep into her sanctuary. Her whole effort . . . is to interpose an aesthetic filter between herself and a dreary dystopian world” (13). However, to call her world a “filter” is not enough; it is more accurately a borderland that shelters her.

The narrator creates an ontology not dependent on the limitations of her physical circumstances. She relocates her self into a space where she has agency and her narrative is the transportive device: “I go through the tea making ceremony . . . All the while my mind is with my heroine, smiling grimly as she pilots the power-sledge between bare cliffs” (35). She is with her heroine, not an observer, but someone who simultaneously occupies and controls the narrative. Brennan charges that “her space-opera antidote is inadequate to the task of creating an enduring sense of freedom” (16). Yet Arnason conceives of sf as a means to authority based on understanding:

I liked popular fiction that was set outside the ordinary world. Maybe I was escaping, though I don’t remember the science fiction that I read in the 1950s as being particularly comforting. I remember lots of stories set in police states and in radioactive wastelands. Maybe I turned to science fiction not to escape the world I found myself in, but to understand it. (Women 100)

When she builds the world of “The Warlord of Saturn’s Moons,” she also encodes a critique of the real world’s social order.

Irony is Arnason’s narrative strategy for critiquing a society that marginalizes women and a genre that assigns these women a limited role in its traditions. Throughout she juxtaposes incongruous images together and repeatedly shifting the narrative arcs and playing with the reader’s expectations: “my heroine races across the methane snow, and I
go make myself tea” (35). The embedded story may be a liberated space for the narrator, but Arnason denies readers the illusion of a cohesive and complete world that could be used to replace or escape their objective reality. Pamela Sargent rightly comments in *Women of Wonder* that Arnason writes “of science fiction’s tendency to pander to escapism” (19). Irony comes into play because Arnason constructs a narrative that mimics escapist sf literature, but infuses it with subversive themes. Linda Hutcheon notes this method and its drawbacks:

Ironic intimacy with the dominant discourses it contests – it uses their very language as its said – is its strength, for it allows ironic discourse both to buy time (to be permitted and even listened to, even if not understood) . . . This intimacy, then, is what makes irony potentially an effective strategy of oppositionality. But intimacy can also be seen as complicity. (*Irony’s* 30)

In one sense, Arnason colludes with a culture industry that finds glamorized protagonists and formulaic space opera motifs appealing. Arnason’s bold, pulpy title is certainly meant to create such an appeal. By framing the extraordinary events of “Red’s” adventure with the ordinary experiences of the narrator, Arnason achieves an unexpected leveling effect. In a society where beauty and heroism are valued, the reader becomes equally invested in the thoughts and welfare of the plain and much less adventurous “Silver,” who shares status with the heroine. While the narrator clearly envies her heroine, she does not neglect her “real” world in favor of the world she creates and she refuses to foreground the fantastic at the expense of the real, suggesting that “escapism” is not meant to compose the entirety of individual experience. Additionally, by introducing a nondescript woman as the author, Arnason teases her readers for the mistaken cultural perception that sf is written by men and for men. Brennan ventures further and poses the
question: “Isn’t Arnason, in Silver’s deconstructive commentary on her space opera, putting under erasure the modernist notion . . . that creativity is a sacred activity reserved for a special few?” (14). She is essentially rebuking institutionalized ideas about the authorship.

The sense of irony set up through the narrative structure is amplified by the text’s unorthodox content. Brennan reasons that “The commentary keeps her teetering on the wire between the trivial – her choice to write space opera – and the serious – her choice to undercut the prescriptive form and content of this escapist/fantasy genre” (13).

Arnason also varies the formula to destabilize the “prescriptive form,” as Hutcheon describes: “parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (Politics 89).

Arnason’s parody establishes continuity with the space opera tradition. She uses the iconic figure of a lone hero with ray guns and rockets who matches wits with an arch villain on the intergalactic frontier. These images valorize the masculinized aspects of power and intellect that are employed in war, yet differences begin when the male hero is displaced by a woman who is physically adept, and invested with a sense of purpose that extends beyond the traditional domestic sphere. Readers who are familiar with the space opera formulas may anticipate that by configuring a woman with these heroic qualities, she will be successful, but Arnason demonstrates that strength and a talent for intrigue are insufficient to win every battle and that the simple transposition of the male/female hero role is ultimately unsatisfying. The mission fails, and the heroine despairs when she realizes that “she has sacrificed her partner, her love to bring them [the government] the information they already had” (49). This is a distinct reversal of the expectation that
women are more likely to sacrifice themselves, to be the ones in need of rescue, or to choose love over duty.  

There discord and the undercurrent of unhappiness and anxiety that surfaces in the interplanetary adventure makes it evident that adapting the masculinized “discourse of Will” that Adam Roberts sees in the early pulps is inadequate for the narrator’s purposes. Arnason’s “Silver” is not able completely to reinvent the formula she has borrowed, and her character, despite accomplishing her mission, is denied a triumphant ending. The vague sense of something missing is a comment on the pulp formula’s limitations; early sf is frequently criticized for its outright failure in terms of valuing human connections and conveying emotion. Heinlein admitted this weakness: “Much so-called science fiction is not about human beings and their problems, consisting instead of a fictionized framework, peopled by cardboard figures, on which is hung an essay about the Glorious Future of Technology . . . I’ve done it myself” (Writing 16). Arnason recalls frustration as she looked for a way to express herself in a genre lacking strong female characters and writers:

All through the 1950s and most of the 1960s, I wrote about men. They were outlaws and exiles, people who didn’t fit in. My anger came out in their stories, as did my sense of alienation. Like them, I was living on someone else’s planet. It don’t think it ever occurred to me that these people, who were full of my emotions, ought to be women . . . Part of the problem was that I was writing science fiction. The few women writers in the field hid behind initials or androgynous names. (Women 102)

Arnason’s characters in “The Warlord of Saturn’s Moons” are uncomfortable with their feelings. In an oblique allusion to the heroine’s intimacy with 409, the narrator explains

17 Eric S. Rabkin writes: “an honest historian of science fiction must recognize that most science fiction still winds up depicting women as exploited. The first dominant image is that of a woman exploited through her selflessness . . . [and] selflessness takes on another face, that of the lovestruck female” (14).
that “neither of them is demonstrative” (37). She is equally reluctant to express desire: “I find myself stirred by the same passion that stirs my heroine. I begin to feel uneasy. . . . I could, of course, kill him off” (37). Each character suffers explicitly from the inability to manage feelings or communicate in meaningful ways – 409 becomes addicted to a drug that helps him suppress “dangerous emotions” but renders him indifferent to everything. In the final scene, the heroine is left “weeping” and alienated from her lover (45-46). The emotionally shallow characters have no way to connect.

Communication becomes a focal point in Arnason’s later fiction. Virginia Woolf observed that “the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex . . . Yet, it is the masculine values that prevail” (73). Arnason criticized the masculinized ideals of the pulp tradition, and set new priorities for her own work. Arnason abandons the idealized image of the lone hero and the associated paradigms that were set by generations of men before her. If the story of the silver-haired maiden lady and the red-headed heroine were told by Arnason today, perhaps they would have offered the Warlord tea?
IV. LIKE NOTHING ON EARTH: [RE]TELLING STORIES OF OTHER
DIMENSIONS IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S THE BLIND ASSASSIN

Margaret Atwood’s tenth novel, The Blind Assassin, reflects her long acquaintance with the imaginative possibilities of science fictional narratives. Her work also blends the rich language and expressiveness of a poet with the awareness of a thoughtful and experienced feminist advocate. This is a complex cross-genre text that follows the lives of two sisters, Iris and Laura Chase, who grow up in the years between the world wars. Strange planets and alien landscapes appear in the fractured and poignant recollections of the elderly Iris, who knows that she is dying and decides to write a memoir. Woven into Iris’s memories are four interrelated sf stories. These stories emerge as brilliant pieces in an elaborate collage of daydreams, myths, poems, family histories and newspaper clippings. Enfolded as episodes within an embedded novella (also titled The Blind Assassin), they take the form of tales told to an anonymous young woman by her lover in their stolen moments. They are a confluence of memory, imagination, and truth, resurrected and transcribed by Iris Chase in the final days of her life.

The framing memoir engages the history of the sf pulps and their ambiguous cultural position through Iris’ memories of reading forbidden magazines. She frets over her limited access, “not touching and careful not to be seen looking” (399), noting the names of classics like Weird Tales, Wonder Stories and Astounding while she scans the
newsstands. From within the text, the embedded novella presents the four elaborately connected pulp stories. On the surface, they position women as inconsequential, objectified and subordinate. However, the narrator refashions their substance and meaning from a feminist perspective and sometimes uncovers strong female images even in the most male-oriented plots. Atwood questions whether the female presence in the pulps was as subdued as many believe. She offers four distinguishable sf storylines: “The Blind Assassin,” the “Peach Women of Aa’A,” “Alien on Ice,” and the “Lizard Men of Xenor.” This is a kind of triptych, though the narratives are layered rather than sequential; her novel is entitled The Blind Assassin, the embedded novella is The Blind Assassin, and one of the short stories within the novella is also “The Blind Assassin.” Each contains evidence of a disruptive feminine subtext hidden within the formulaic plot that features male scientists, soldiers and heroes. Atwood's text deserves reconsideration in the context of its feminist appropriation of the genre’s traditional “masculine” history and conventions.

Unlike Atwood’s previous ventures into speculative fiction, The Blind Assassin has received limited critical attention from the sf academic community. They may dismiss its fantastic elements as allegorical embellishments or fail to see her strategies for reinventing the narrative precedents set in the pulp era.18 The profusion of narrative levels suggests that the text's "reality" does not have borders readily distinguishable from imagination and memory; the metaphorically dense stories create a shifting ontological space where the reader discovers a feminine voice exercising its agency despite

prohibitive social conditions. This ontological space is liberated from objective reality, for according to Lyotard: “Art does not imitate nature. It creates a world apart” (97). In this “world apart” it is possible to resist the shaping discourses of culture, gender and economics.

The integration of pulp sf in a text situated during this era signals a transgressive undercurrent and intensifies the sense of countercultural tension operating below the surface of the narrative. The pulps are collectively dismissed as "low" culture, and Atwood leverages this history to show that despite superficial compliance, her female characters the conventions forced on them through using a female narrator. She then interrupts and reconfigures the insistently patriarchal formulas of classic pulp sf. The Blind Assassin is more than an elaborate pulp novel with sf features; it is also a novel about how sf creates a space for protest, transformation and refuge.

The memoir begins with Iris’ recollection of her sister’s suicide, and moves backward in time to tell the story of their introduction to Alex Thomas, a political insurrectionist and pulp sf writer whose "best" stories are set in "another dimension." Though the embedded novella was originally published under Laura’s name, Iris confesses in her memoir that she wrote it; also, though the characters are nameless, it tells the story of her secret romance with Alex. The fictionalized “narrator” is based on Iris; the “writer” is based on Alex. The reader is never allowed, however, to see any text created by the male writer.19 The female narrator relates from memory everything she sees, hears, and imagines. Karen Stein concludes that Iris metamorphoses from a passive

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19 In an interview, Atwood explains that while Iris does not show the reader everything, she nevertheless tells the truth: "There are things she [Iris] doesn't tell us. She never actually lies" (Waltzing 239).
reader/listener into a writer because “story-telling is her way to re-envision, understand, and justify her life; to gain power” (135). Writing is a generative act, a way to assert her repressed voice and identity. As a narrator, she is able to claim and transform the writer's fantastic stories of other dimensions, and in doing so, tells her own story. When she imagines escaping her circumstances, she explains that "None of this happens, of course. Or it does happen, but not so you would notice. It happens in another dimension of space" (465). Within this "other dimension" she has the capacity to make choices and assign her own meaning to experiences instead of resigning control of her “story” to others.

Though the narrator is initiated into this space by the writer and must negotiate its masculine landscapes, she conceives her own counter-narratives and attempts to subvert the writer’s characters, countering his version of events; "Listen – it's this way. . . . They [the azure-haired tomb-dwelling women] aren't actually dead at all. They just put those stories around so they'll be left in peace" (342-343). She wants a more hopeful world, one where the dead are not always lost. Atwood explains that one aspect of the desire to re-imagine stories is “the quest for a lost beloved . . . . [it] is an important motif when we’re talking about writers and what drives them" (Negotiating 170). Iris searches for her sister, for her lover lost to the war, and perhaps for her long-dead family. In this sense, the novel is simultaneously a creation, a re-creation and a resurrection. As a storyteller, she breaks her conditioned silence and defies time and death to bring her beloved ones back to life, if only for a few pages in "another dimension."
The alternate dimension novum\textsuperscript{20} is a strategy for conveying how "things could be different" (Suvin xiv). In the embedded novel, the narrator's lover offers to create a story for her, set in a place of her choosing, recommending "another dimension" because "Anything can happen there" (9). She turns down "cruise ships . . . wrist kissing, and hypocritical slop" (9) and asks, "Could I have another dimension of space?" (9). The narrator's interest in this other dimension originates from resistance to her social circumstances and a desire for substantial change. She rejects stories that promise only romance and adventure; she wants the impossible. Atwood says that sf “can explore proposed changes to social organization, by showing us what they might actually look like” (Guardian par. 7), and Pamela Sargent elaborates on this idea:

literature can depict women imprisoned by attitudes toward them, women at odds with what is expected of them, or women making the best of their present situation in past or present societies. Only science fiction . . . can show us women in entirely new and different surroundings. It can explore what we might become if and when the present restrictions on our lives vanish. (16)

Atwood uses this subversive capacity to show how women can resist their circumstances. Iris writes that there was a time when she "still wanted to change something . . . do something myself, make something, from whatever unpromising materials" (296). She feels powerless in the real world, without skills or resources, so her solution is to construct a world of her own from the text of her memories and dreams. Her reality is bleak; she is an adulteress, her lover is a fugitive, and they meet in shabby, borrowed rooms. Together, they are "ruinous," and after an argument, she thinks sadly that it is "no wonder they resort to stories" (263). She chooses this vivid “other dimension,” which she

\textsuperscript{20} A novum (pl. nova) is a ‘point of difference,’ a term adopted by Darko Suvin to describe a material symbol of change in a sf text, a “totalizing phenomena . . . deviating from the . . . norm of reality” (64).
occupies with the “hallucinogenic intensity” (28) of Frederic Jameson’s schizophrenic. Its existence is so real to her that she mourns its loss when she learns of her lover’s death: “In the sky three moons have risen. Zycron . . . Beloved planet, land of my heart. Where once, long ago, I was happy” (469). Her worlds are not equivalent; McHale observes that postmodern texts often feature conflict on “an ontological level: a world-within-the-world, often one in competition with the primary diegetic world of the text” (128). He concludes that “what postmodernist fiction imitates, the object of its mimesis, is the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures” (38). Postmodern fiction shows individuals who can choose to occupy multiple realities. For those who are oppressed in the ‘real’ world, sf’s worlds can offer enclaves of freedom.

Iris’s passivity in the “real” world is ambiguous. From one perspective, her inaction is a sign of collusion with the systems that drove Laura to kill herself. Completely absorbed in her “other dimension,” Iris has ignored clues that her sister is being sexually abused. Iris also knows that her sister was unstable –Laura once made a “dotty pact with God” (488) and tried to drown herself so that her mother would be restored to life. Alex had been the only man she cared about, and the shock of finding out he was dead and that Iris had been his lover caused her to drive off a bridge. Natalie Cooke argues that “Iris’ complicity in the web of deception . . . ultimately brought tragedy” (143). Iris is self-absorbed, but the “other dimension” is her only refuge from trauma and she sees it as the only place she can express herself. Lorene Birden observes a similar strategy in Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale: “Offred [and Iris]. . . can be seen to create . . . their own false “heres” to counter, combat, or simply forget, for a short while, the ‘here’ that has been imposed on them and has caused them to lose their selves. The
‘here’ of their self-created haven of mental activity and tale-telling is their only true protection” (136). Atwood presents storytelling as a means of critically engaging master narratives, but she also cautions that total escapism is irresponsible.

Atwood uses cognitive estrangement, the experience of simultaneous identification and alienation experienced by sf readers, to confront how women are commodified and conditioned to behave according to conservative social norms. The story of Zycron's enslaved maidens (who are expected to remain silent and sexless) is strange but recognizable and gives perspective on the events of the memoir. By positioning the episodes of her life beside these vivid images, Iris contextualizes her experience within a greater web of political, cultural, and economic institutions that manipulate women. She protests the forces that have created her situation by creating her own text. Sarah Lefanu argues that cultural authorities can be disrupted with sf’s “subversive potential . . . [it is] a language for the narration of dreams, for the dissolution of self and for the interrogation of cultural order [emphasis mine] (56). Atwood uses Iris’s countercultural impulses to subvert the ordered, patriarchal gender constructions that dominated the cultural landscape of the 1920s and linger today. As an adolescent, Iris was pressured to adopt the values her father considered appropriate: "neatness, obedience, silence and no evident sexuality" (159). The silent maidens are sold to preserve the wealth of the city, which corresponds to Iris’s forced marriage, made to support her family. These exploited girls are conditioned to believe that "the welfare of the entire kingdom depended on their selflessness"; the aristocracy rationalizes that the cruel

21 Darko Suvin introduces the term and names sf as "the literature of cognitive estrangement," referring to the experience of simultaneous identification and alienation that results from a plausible "imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (8).
removal of the girls' tongues "was not a mutilation . . . but an improvement" in their
service to "the Goddess of Silence" (29). Near the end of her memoir, Iris asks: "What is
it I'll want from you? . . . Only a listener, perhaps; only someone who will see me" (521).
Though her voice was silenced by expectations of “good behavior” from her father,
teachers and husband, she finally retells her history from her own perspective.

Atwood's narrator finds a way to inhabit the male spaces in pulp sf history
through writing and re-imagining them: "What I remembered," says Iris, “is also what I
imagined, which is also the truth [emphasis added]" (512). History remains unchanged,
but the feminist discourse is grafted directly onto the space occupied by the traditional
masculine narrative structures. The early sf pulps often favor the male perspective and
reproduce patriarchal ideologies. Atwood opens a dialogue with history when she
positions The Blind Assassin in this era. She asks how the past occupies and continues to
inform the present, demonstrating how it can be reconfigured to include the feminine
perspective through marginalized narrators. Linda Hutcheon explains that postmodern
literature has the “ability to rewrite or to re-present the past in fiction and history . . .
[and] open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive" (Poetics 110), and
argues that looking back is "a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue" (Poetics 4). Iris sees
versions of herself represented in newspapers, the writer’s pulp stories, and the inaccurate
biographies that academics attempt to construct from the artifacts of her past (the novella
gains critical attention from feminist academics decades after its publication). By re-
constructing history in her memoir and re-telling the four stories as she experienced them,
she refuses to be defined by any of them. Coral Ann Howells agrees that Iris "succeeds in
undermining the accounts of official history . . . [her] memoir is her version of history" (168). Atwood recodes history’s pulp narratives to include the silent feminine voice.

Atwood’s personal experience with reading the pulps shows that she is aware that the genre occupies the borderlands of taboo:

I learned many things about the seedier side of life via the printed page. My reading up to the age of 16 [1955] was wide but indiscriminating – everything from Jane Austen to True Romance magazines to pulp science fiction to *Moby Dick* – but it divided into three kinds of books: books read in school . . . acceptable books read openly . . . and books suspected of being taboo [emphasis added]. (*Negotiations* 13)

She adds that, "I used to read those lurid sci-fi magazines, the ones with the monsters. I remember the period of pulp science fiction very well" (Tidmarsh 23). Iris knows that she is defying the cultural norms for a woman of her social class, and self-consciously admits that the people at the newsstands "must have thought I was crazy" (460). The “Lizard Men of Xenor” is a “story of the kind bums read on boxcars, or school-age boys by the light of the flashlight . . . watchmen at midnight . . . salesmen in their traveler’s hotels” (400). These readers are socially disengaged, awkward or inferior. Yet sf texts have potential for social commentary, and Atwood defends them: “Even fabulist fictions are moral . . . Science fiction is dripping with message” (*Conversations* 204). Both the memoir and the novella use the pulps to embedded a feminist “message” of nonconformity.

Visual impact was a critical element in the pulps: “the interaction between the cover art and cover stories in pulp sf magazines demonstrates that the female alien . . . [was] transformed in a way that rendered them for feminist appropriation. The scantily clad cover girls undoubtedly . . . sold copies, but they also emphasize the feminine”
(Roberts, *Species 41*). The sense of escape, paired with images of feminine sexuality, could have had a potent effect on the young and dreamy Chase girls. Iris remembers that she chose their vivid strangeness over the assortment of romance magazines that were smuggled across the border and discovered hidden under the housekeeper’s mattress. They form her first illicit experiences and foreshadow the sexuality and defiance of social conventions that she exhibits throughout. She recollects: “I preferred . . . other planets. Spaceships from the future, where women would wear very short skirts made of shiny fabric and everything would gleam . . . *Silly*, Reenie called these. *Like nothing on earth.* But that’s what I liked about them” (152-153). The writer is intensely aware of the sexual dynamic that the pulps exploited, and he deliberately integrates this imagery: “He needs something that will sell. It’s back to the never-fail dead women, slavering for blood . . . picture the cover illustration the boys will likely come up with, and then go from there” (250). Atwood understands the power of these provocative images: "Look into any women's magazine, and you'll see lots of vampy ads, especially for lingerie and perfume. The idea that such things are just male projections being imposed on women implies that women are zombies and idiots, with no mind of their own. The fact is that such images represent power. It may not be a kind of power you approve of, but it's power all the same" (*Waltzing* 198). Atwood suggests that when reconsidered in these terms, the images of women that populated the pulps are empowering. When female writers evoke these images, they appropriate this power directly as their own.

When a first version of *The Blind Assassin* novella is published under the name of Iris’s sister, Laura, in 1947, the community reacts with anger, shock, and takes it as evidence of her mental instability, proof that “she had never been right in the head” (40).
This reaction is substantiated by Eric Davin’s historical evidence gathered from women who wrote to the sf letter columns to report that they were thought to be “crazy.” The idea of open sexuality paired with the dissolute nature of sf was so outrageous in the character of a young woman that Laura was thought to be insane. The novella is rejected as a “piece of filth” (40), the ministers call it “obscene” (39), and Richard (Iris’s amoral, manipulative husband), calls it “garbage” (510). Iris recalls with satisfaction that the book had the salacious “aura of brimstone and taboo” (39) and years later remained "unmentionable." Umberto Eco supports the volatile potential of “low” art, noting that it is “possible to find elements of revolution and contestation in works that apparently lend themselves to facile consumption” (529). The book could not have caused this outrage unless it was threatening.

The most observable quality of the embedded novella is the unusual style. Virginia Woolf believed that women had a distinct way of expressing themselves, and that they would find traditional masculine forms inadequate: “The weight, the pace, the stride of a man’s mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him . . . the first thing she would find, setting pen to paper, was that there was no common sentence ready for her use” (75). Atwood’s narrator leaves no trace of the writer’s masculine sentences; instead, she adapts the stories to her own voice to express how she felt about them, what she saw in them, and how she experienced them. The novella’s form is distinctly supple, with no standard dialogue markers, and the text is chronologically adrift within the memoir narrative; all characteristics ascribed to “feminine writing . . . [the] primary intention [of which] is to challenge and disrupt the dominant discourse by means of its experimental, fluid and non-linear qualities”
The technique conveys the awareness of an intensely subjective feminine experience. It also acts a subtle reminder that the narrator has complete control over how the sf stories are articulated to the reader.

On the surface, the narrator is a receptive, non-creative figure. The stories are told to her; they are not her own. Yet she prompts, questions, redirects, and arranges the narrative threads. She sometimes contributes in direct ways. Inspired by her knowledge of history, she gives the writer strategic advice on matters of war and treachery: “it’s in Herodotus, or something like that is. The fall of Babylon” (342) and later mentions Cortez and The Conquest of Mexico. She argues for genuine relationships and the possibility of a future: “the blind assassin and the girl with no tongue can live . . . and sooner or later they’ll have children who can see and speak, and they’ll be very happy” (343). Eric Davin observes this characteristic in women who wrote early sf: “The solution of male writers to the perceived problem – a conformist and anonymous future – was an alienated and reactionary individualism. However, the solution offered by female writers was often the bridging of solitude and loneliness to establish emotional rapport” (276-277). The narrator also protests the exploitation of the girls and confronts the writer over his casual brutality: “Dead girls in bridal veils, why would that amuse me?” (30). The sacrificial mentality encouraged in women is a focal point for the critical work on this text. For instance, Bousan writes:

In pointedly connecting . . . Iris and Laura Chase to the sacrifice of the virgin . . . [Atwood] probes the cultural – and historical – repetition of sexual violence against women . . . Atwood also underscores the damage that can result from the cultural and literary idealization of female self-sacrifice as she illustrates not only the historical oppression of women in a patriarchal system but also women’s cultural blindness to, and thus collusion with, their own victimization. (251)
The narrator indicates self-awareness when she objects; she is speaking out against her own fate. The plight of women being sacrificed to greater powers is a recognizable trope, and Atwood uses the narrator to speak for those who are exploited by a culture that capitalizes on their body. Atwood’s strategy of appropriation becomes clear in the short stories. The “Peach Women of Aa’A” is a science fantasy about two soldiers who crash onto a planet inhabited by lovely, golden, female aliens. The aliens care for the wounded men and attend their every desire. They are described as physically identical, but “One of the girls was a sexpot, the other was more serious-minded and could discuss art, literature, and philosophy, not to mention theology” (353). The description alludes to Iris, who is sexually active, and possibly Laura, who is deeply religious and politically conscious. However, the narrator also exhibits duality. She alternates between sexual responsiveness and cultured conversation (she makes insightful references to Herodotus, the Bible, and Ovid, among others). She frets that “he’ll think she’s showing off” (124) when she speaks Latin. She knows intuitively that this duality, her sexuality and intellect, is difficult for him to reconcile; it confuses the gender roles he is accustomed to. When she attempts to engage him as an equal, he often flusters her with crude, taunting sexual remarks, though “he knows she wants a love story out of him” (276). His discomfort and hostility is extended to the Peach women, and though he had promised it would be a “happy” story, he tells her “There was nothing these babes wouldn’t do. They were completely shameless . . . [and] When you hit the women, no blood came out, only juice. When you hit them harder, they dissolved” (354). The Peach Women do not appear to
feel pain, much like the “vacant, posed imperviousness of all well-brought-up girls” (46). The writer suggests that they may not feel anything at all, and he deliberately neglects her need for an emotional connection in order to maintain control of the relationship. The narrator tells him: “You’re wrong about the Peach Women . . . They aren’t the way you think” (356). She challenges his representation of feminine experience. Hutcheon argues that "postmodern strategies . . . offer ways for women artists at least to contest the old – the representations of both their bodies and their desires" (*Politics* 164). She reinterprets the writer’s narrative through her own subjectivity.

“Aliens on Ice” is the story of a team of four explorers who discover an alien frozen inside a glacier. Early sf commonly objectifies women, so it is unsurprising that the female scientist is known by a series of demeaning epithets in the writer’s mind; “The woman is always B, which stands for Beyond Belief, Bird Brain, or Big Boobs, depending on his mood. Or Beautiful Blonde, of course” (277). She is known to have an excessive, female way of putting things, and the other scientists frequently ignore B’s “hunches.” Despite a tendency to “forget her mittens” and speak to the sleigh dogs in “Russian baby talk” (277), B’s influence is crucial – after all, ”It can't be a story unless the aliens invade, and some dame burst out of her jumpsuit"(249). The alien’s response to her is telling: “He loves her so much he’ll assimilate her – make her part of himself, forever” (279). The writer considers several ways he can use her – the alien may conquer the world with her at his side or he may decide to inhabit her and seduce all of the others. She embodies the contradictory male experience of femininity, the dissonant fear and desire inspired by the “other”. Though they all desire her, she appears to be subordinate. She is the only one who perceives the danger when the alien is discovered, noting that the
dogs are upset, and telling the others that “she has an uncanny feeling, a hunch that all will not go well” (278). Joanna Russ would characterize her abilities as "passive and involuntary," where "The power is somehow in the woman, but she does not really possess it" (83). Like the Beautiful Blonde, the narrator is valued for her looks, something she cannot control.

The third story, “The Lizard Men of Xenor,” combines threads from “The Blind Assassin” and the “Peach Women of Aa’A.” The published version that the narrator discovers on the newsstand bears no trace of the intimacy shared between the assassin and the mute girl, or even of the Peach Women. The writer has disregarded the narrator’s contributions and erased her hopeful sense of the future. The women of the story are reduced to victims: “taken to the Temple and locked into it for their own safety” (400) or “shut up in cages and drooled at through the bars” (401). The mute temple girl she identifies with is “last seen hiding under the bed” (402). The story is emotionally vacant, filled with “newfangled gadgets” and modified into a cipher for ideological discourse. Zycron is threatened by the Lizard horde (whose intent to create a master race is a likely metaphor for Nazism), and the writer’s Bolshevik sympathies are made clear in the conclusion: “Barbarians and urbanites, incumbents and rebels, masters and slaves – all forget their differences and make common cause. Class barriers dissolve” (400). The feminist content may be lost, but the context that surrounds the story preserves the sense that the narrator is resisting social conventions by reading it. As the wife of a wealthy industrialist and the daughter of local “aristocracy,” she belongs to a social class that is very invested in maintaining “class barriers.” Yet she purposefully acquires a politically charged text that would bring disapproval from her husband, from her social circle, and
even from her government (the Red Scare of the 1940s is part of the novel’s backdrop, and the story is framed as communist propaganda). Reading sf is a way for her to undermine their controlling expectations of her behavior.

The final story is “The Blind Assassin.” It is the history of the planet Zycron and its decadent culture. The elite enslave poor children to make their famous carpets and sacrifice young girls to appease the appetites of absent gods and corrupt aristocrats. Insurrection builds among the populace, and one of the mysterious blind assassins is sent to murder a silenced girl who is scheduled for execution by the king. They fall in love and escape the city, though they are murdered by wolves in the end. The alien planet with its strange sun fades into the background and the story emerges of “how the girl who couldn’t speak and the man who couldn’t see fell in love” (256). Their relationship is the heart of the novel. The narrator is hopeful enough to propose an alternative fate to the writer’s tragic ending, a happy conclusion for the assassin and the mute girl where they have a future and she pointedly tells him: “I’ve always had my own ideas” (341). He overrules her ending, but as the last survivor, she makes the story her own. Faye Hammill offers an account of the story’s social commentary:

This novel-within-a-novel conforms accurately and self-consciously to the conventions of the 1930’s pulp sf, yet also comments directly on the interwar Canadian high society recalled by Iris, providing exaggerated reflections of its hierarchies, corruption and political plotting. . . . she endures rather than protesting openly, and thus is open to accusations of complicity. Yet . . . [Iris] subsequently offers a more effective form of protest through recording . . . [her] stories. (525)

Parkin-Gounelas corroborates Hammill’s interpretation and foregrounds the connection between sexuality and economics: “Iris's narrative can be said to imagine the process of exchange value under capitalism, with the female body predictably functioning as a
stopgap in the economy of desire” (687). For the narrator, this story represents the tragedy of a life spent dominated by a culture that views her as a disposable commodity. It is a coded but strident criticism of women’s subordinate sexual and financial status.

The many stories of *The Blind Assassin* form a vivid constellation of feminist messages. They originate in “another dimension” and resonate across worlds as dreams of independence and the hope of change. Atwood’s overlooked accomplishment is that she has brought to life a critical trend in feminist sf theory – the project of recovery and reinvention that establishes the feminine presence throughout sf’s history. On the final page of the memoir, Iris tells her granddaughter that Alex’s legacy to her is “the realm of infinite speculation,” and that she is “free to reinvent [her] self at will” (513). This freedom is also Atwood’s gift to her readers.
**AFTERWORD**

Even as sf is profitably popularized in literature, television, and film, the sense that it is inferior literature persists. The tropes of the pulp years are endlessly revisited on the big screen, but there is resistance to acknowledging their origins and value. David Langford is an author and columnist who monitors and comments on the public perception of sf. He is responsible for *Ansible*, a semi-professional sf fanzine, which features a section titled "As Others See Us," where he collects dismissive, outrageous, or otherwise amusing comments that are published primarily in the mainstream media and that slander the genres of sf and fantasy.\(^2\) The theme carries over into the column he writes for *SFX*. Langford explains: “[I] obsessively collect the posturings of newspaper and other pundits who daren't say a good word about SF. Otherwise, you know, they'd be made to stand grimly to attention in a hollow square of literary critics and suffer the ritual snipping-off of their credentials” (*SFX* 160). One of Langford’s recurrent themes in his *SFX* column is the distance “serious” writers try to put between themselves and the sf label. Writers who achieve critical and popular recognition are often elevated “above” the label. Atwood’s texts are often contested territory, and Kurt Vonnegut, who used pulp sf tropes in nearly all of his novels, openly resented being associated with sf: “I became a

\(^2\) Langford gathers relevant quotes he comes across in his own reading, though currently readers submit the majority. When asked what prompted him to begin collecting these disparaging remarks, he explains, “The phenomenon had been noted long before I came to record it. A famous comment by Robert Conquest appeared as the epigraph sf anthology *Spectrum 2*, published in 1962: 'SF's no good!' they bellow till we're deaf. 'But this looks good ...' 'Well then, it's not SF.' I dare say this was at the back of my mind and sensitized me to variations on the theme, long before the *Ansible* item title became a regular feature” (email interview 2010). The “As Others See Us” column has been included regularly in *Ansible* since 1999.
so-called science fiction writer when someone decreed that I was a science fiction writer. I did not want to be classified as one, so I wondered in what way I'd offended that I would no get credit for being a serious writer" (Man 16). The recent screen adaptation of Edgar Rice Burrough’s *John Carter of Mars* is scheduled to be released as simply *John Carter*, because the director, Andrew Stanton, argues that “not everybody's into sci-fi” (IO9). Langford remarks that “Some people still perform incredible contortions to avoid the sf/fantasy label” (*SFX* 133). Critics and the public both equivocate when they find merit in anything related to sf and are especially skeptical of the pulps.

The four writers discussed here, who all grew up with the sf pulps, chose to reinvent its stories and images rather than bend to the pressure of this skepticism and reject pulp’s traditions. Moore, Heinlein, Arnason and Atwood each repurpose the evocative and culturally resonant pulp landscapes to create new messages and to question the regressive myths that informed the originals. Through these pulps, Moore challenged history’s conclusions. Heinlein questioned why society reserved different roles for men and women. Arnason confronted a tradition that valued individuality or beauty over community and personal connections. Atwood demonstrated that women to could take control of their history and experiences and assign meaning to their own images. Postmodernism’s strategies of assimilation and adaptations enable these writers to keep the colorful spirit of the pulps intact and bring them into these new and meaningful contexts.
WORKS CITED


