Kicking against the Pricks

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THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES IN SCIENCE FICTION
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T he curse of Australian literary reviewing is unacknowledged conflicts of interest. X is an ex; Y rejected my novel; Z visits whenever he is in town. Readers are usually unaware of a personal history between author and reviewer, and thus cannot gauge how it biases the review. As an honourable rule of thumb, friends or enemies should not be reviewed: but what about dinner guests? That is the principled position, which I now compromise. In the case of The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction, I know the author, I am thanked in the acknowledgments, and appear several times in the text in connection with the Tiptree Award, of which I was a judge. The only way to approach this book is to review it in isolation from its author. After all, the two are manifestly not the same. And if the author stops talking to me as a consequence, well then, so be it.

The Battle of the Sexes is a book about a literary genre’s development, that genre having several unique features. Science fiction (SF) denotes a field of writing linked by common — speculative, scientific, fantastical — subjects and narrative technique, in which quality ranges from pulp to high art. It also has a highly engaged readership, the fans, a hierarchy with their own jargon: ‘trufen’, ‘fanboys’ and ‘filthy pros’ (professional writers).

Once literary criticism of SF was defensive, justifying its existence; now presses such as Wesleyan issue science fiction ‘classics’. Similarly, studies of SF have now moved beyond the literature to the cultural context of the genre. The Battle of the Sexes is about writing and also reading, and the relationship between SF fans and their favourite literature. As Larbalestier shows, one aspect of this interaction was gender; and it was something about which the readership (male and female) could be highly critical.

‘The Battle of the Sexes’ is not a term that could be so readily used with reference to other literary genres, such as the romance or the western. Indeed, the title of this book will raise eyebrows for those to whom ‘sci-fi’ is a boy’s own genre of rockets and ray-guns. However, to work in the field, and to be of the feminine ilk, is to become acutely aware of gender matters, both when writing and also interpersonally. The subject of science has historically been a male preserve. Just as women scientists are a significant minority, so are the women writers of SF. Sometimes it would seem that the boys wish to eliminate them altogether, through deliberate or unconscious omission. Writer Bruce Sterling famously mentioned no female science fiction writers in the introduction to his cyberpunk anthology Mirrorshades; similarly, in Australia, Race Mathews, in his guest of honour speech at last year’s National Convention, listed his favourite science fiction writers, local and international, again totally male.

Most intelligent readers are aware of the explosion of women writing SF in the 1960s and 1970s, with Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ the most famous. Larbalestier also quotes writer Connie Willis on the influence of women during the 1950s. However, what this book valuably does is to push back the dates of female intervention even further. It locates women at the beginnings of genre SF, with the 1920s pulp Amazing Stories. This magazine included a letters column, which printed readers’ addresses, allowing them to contact each other independently. Examination of such columns in Amazing and its successors reveals some formidable ‘femmefans’, who had issues with how women were portrayed in the pulp stories. Numerous gems are unearthed, such as 1930s letters from Isaac Asimov, then a teenage fan, on why love interests (and by implication girls) had no place in SF.

The Battle of the Sexes thus kicks against the pricks, not only in the pulp magazine era, but in the postwar decades when SF entered hardback and paperback book markets. Here again Larbalestier charts misogynist reaction, from the dismissal in the 1940s and 1950s of women’s work as ‘sweet little domestic stories’, to the 1980s claim by Charles Platt that female writers were ‘raping’ science fiction. Asimov, by then, had changed his tune: ‘feminisation’ had ‘broadened and deepened the field’, liberating both men and women.

The final chapters of the book are devoted to the most fascinating example of performative gender in SF: Alice Sheldon, who for nine years won awards and acclaim as ‘James Tiptree, Jr’, an author perceived to be ‘ineluctably male’. Her tragic death led to the formation of the ‘Tiptree’ award, for fiction that explores and examines notions of gender. Larbalestier finds the prize ‘a fantastic (in every sense) site for the recognition’ of gender diversities. There is nothing like it in other genres, which inevitably leads to the question: without the battle of the sexes in science fiction, would the award have ever come into existence?

This book is a highly valuable contribution to science fiction and gender studies, both in its research into the pulps, and its criticism of more ‘literary’ science fiction. It rightly upsets the notion of SF as a boy’s club; and also that of literary texts as separate from the communities of their consumers, fans and (amateur) critics. Australians have written very few critiques of science fiction; The Battle of the Sexes may well be the best.