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Science Fiction & Fantasy 2014: How Multicultural Is Your Multiverse?

As the publishing industry as a whole wrestles with issues of diversity, speculative fiction steps into the fray

By Dionne Obeso | Oct 03, 2014

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Science fiction and fantasy have a long history of challenging societal norms. Pioneering writers like the late Octavia Butler, an African-American woman who began publishing in 1971 and achieved great critical and popular success in a genre dominated by white men, and the genre-bending Kit Reed, who has published a novel every year or two since 1961 (her next is due out from Tor in May 2015) and some 100 short stories, have used the genre as a framework for examining sexuality, race, and other real-world issues.

That boundary-pushing tradition continues today, but the world of speculative fiction faces the same challenge as the rest of publishing: overcoming a long history of books being primarily created by, for, and about straight white men.

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Hiring diverse staff at publishing houses, many agree, is a crucial factor in the move toward diversifying characters in books across genres. According to the *PW* Publishing Industry Salary Survey 2014, just 11.3% of publishing employees self-identify as Hispanic (any race), black or African-American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, mixed race, or other nonwhite race. It's easy to see how that homogeneity might make for a sameness in the books published—and how the opposite might hold true, too.

"I think the fact that I am Asian-American has made me more open to reading a range of diversity in books and characters," says Alvina Ling, executive editorial director of Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, which counts among

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the titles on its list plenty of SF/F books. “Maybe I think about it more because I really did notice a lack of diverse characters in the books I read growing up, and I really hungered for that. I wanted to see Asian characters in the books I was reading.”

The We Need Diverse Books campaign, which seeks to address the lack of diverse narratives in children’s literature, has its roots in speculative fiction: it began in April 2014 as a Twitter exchange between YA fantasy authors Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo. The hashtag “#weneeddiversebooks” went viral,

spawning a nonprofit organization whose message is being heard across age categories and genres. “The #weneeddiversebooks movement is a testament to the vast chasm in the market where diversity should be living,” says Andrea LeClair, marketing coordinator at Riptide, which publishes LGBTQ fiction, romance, and erotica, often with fantasy or SF elements.

Where better to break ground than in genres that play with possibility, projection, and the worlds of tomorrow? As Jordan Brown, senior editor at HarperCollins Children’s Books’ Walden Pond Press and Balzer + Bray imprints, says, “SF/F has long been the province of marginalized voices telling stories that break—aggressively, at times—from mainstream media and values.” He reiterates the importance of children and young adults seeing a wide range of heroic narratives in their fiction. “This is the age at which they learn whose stories ‘matter,’ and, thereby, what each of us is allowed to contribute to society.”

Adult readers, too, benefit from literature written with a variety of perspectives. Tricia Narwani, editorial director at Del Rey, cites Karen Lord’s forthcoming SF novel. “Although *The Galaxy Game* [Jan. 2015] is set on distant worlds in the far future,” Narwani says, “her Barbadian heritage informs her view of the world—multivocal, multiracial, multidimensional, that isn’t limited to a single privileged narrative or culture.”

PW looks at how well science fiction and fantasy publishing reflects the diversity of the real world—and where there’s room for improvement.

Mirrors and Windows

“In the past few years we’ve seen a real rise in awareness of issues of diversity in the SF/F community,” says Gillian Redfearn, publishing director of Orbit’s imprint Gollancz. “There is always more to do to promote diversity in literature—and in life—but the recent emphasis from established and debut authors alike has been a positive sign.”

Some quarters of SF/F publishing are actively seeking new voices and representations outside of the so-called mainstream. This year, the Speculative Literature Foundation launched two diversity-centered grants: Diverse Writers, intended to support new and emerging authors from marginalized groups; and Diverse Worlds, for work that presents a diverse world, regardless of the writer’s background. More than 150 aspiring authors applied; the 2014 winners will be announced in mid-October. Tu, a Lee & Low imprint, is hosting its second annual New Visions Award, which solicits science fiction, fantasy, and mystery manuscripts from first-time middle-grade and YA writers of color; the winner will receive a contract for publication.

Stacy Whitman founded Tu Publishing in 2009 with the mission of promoting multicultural children’s fantasy and science fiction; all of the books star people of color. (Lee & Low acquired the company, now Tu Books, in 2010.) Whitman and her staff, she says, are mindful of the concept of windows and mirrors in their work. “There are a lot of mirrors for white readers, who can see themselves represented in fiction, but not quite as many for people of color,” she says. “But even so, fantasy is all about those windows into other worlds and seeing those people and other beings, who are not human, from their own eyes. White readers need that for people of color just as much as people of color need [to see themselves reflected].” The imprint’s forthcoming titles include a work of science fiction starring a Lakota main character: *Rose Eagle* by Joseph Bruchac (Oct.), an e-novella prequel to last year’s *Killer of Enemies*.



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THE ROUNDUP

Publishing news from across the Web

Sherlock Holmes Belongs to Us All

Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous detective (and Benedict Cumberbatch’s famous alter ego), is in the public domain, after the Supreme Court on Monday refused to hear a case brought by Doyle’s estate.

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“SF/F has definitely changed from the golden age of science fiction in the ‘50s,” says Zachary Leibman, assistant editor at Running Press. “It has made huge leaps in terms of fiction featuring women as well as characters of different races and religious outlooks.” *The Mammoth Book of SF Stories by Women* (Dec.), edited by Alex Dally MacFarlane, at more than 500 pages, showcases work written exclusively by female authors, including James Tiptree Jr., the pseudonym the late Alice B. Sheldon began using in 1967.

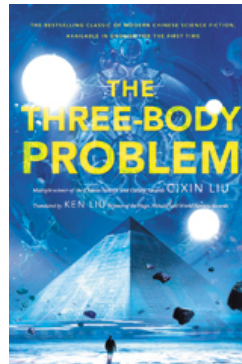
David Pomerico, Harper Voyager’s executive editor, also acknowledges the “whitewashed” history of SF/F. “But this is changing,” he says. “[Author Beth] Cato puts it this way: ‘We live in a colorful world. It’s only right that secondary fantasy worlds are just as

colorful.’” In Cato’s steampunk novels, for example—the newly published *Clockwork Dagger* and its sequel, *Clockwork Crown* (June 2015)—the male lead is a person of color in a largely white Victorianaesque society.

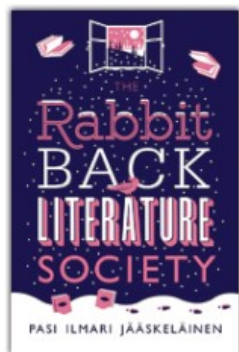
Embracing diversity also means welcoming perspectives from outside the U.S., and that includes works in translation, even amid the oft-cited statistic that only 3% of books published here are originally written in another language. Liz Gorinsky, editor at Tor, points to *The Three-Body Problem* by Cixin Liu (Nov.), part of a trilogy that has sold more than 1.2 million copies in China and has won all the major SF awards in that country.

“This is not only the first major SF book to be translated from Chinese to English, but also the most popular science fiction series in China,” she says. “The book is among the most diverse on our list, since nearly every character is Chinese and many of them are brilliant scientists who happen to be women.”

The Three-Body Problem is translated by Ken Liu, who was born in China and won the Hugo, the Nebula, and the World Fantasy awards with his story “Paper Menagerie,” the first writer to win all three for one fictional work; his forthcoming debut novel, *The Grace of Kings* (Apr. 2015), first in a fantasy series, is on the launch list for Simon & Schuster’s new SF/F imprint



Saga. “It’s an invigorating time to begin acquiring a list in this genre,” says Joe Monti, Saga’s executive editor. “As a snapshot moment, this year’s Hugo Awards can be seen as a referendum on the state of the field. Works that featured women, people of color, and members and themes of importance to the LGBT community became prizewinners.” Julie Dillon won the Best Professional Artist award, in a category in which women are rarely even nominated; Kameron Hurley won two Hugos for a blog post aggressively challenging common narratives about women; and the Campbell Award for Best New Writer not only went to Sofia Samatar, a woman of color, but had a finalist slate that looked like a *Star Trek* casting call (a fact that Samatar noted in her acceptance speech). Women swept the 2014 Nebulas, too.



Saga’s launch list includes, in addition to Ken Liu’s novel, a near-future thriller and a postapocalyptic novel, each by a woman, and the beginning of a military SF series by several authors of diverse backgrounds, all born outside the U.S., writing under a single pseudonym. Similarly, at St. Martin’s imprint Thomas Dunne, “I actively look for books by authors writing outside of the U.S. and the English language,” says executive editor Peter Joseph, who is publishing Finnish author Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen’s *The Rabbit Back Literature Society*, translated by Lola M. Rogers, in January. “In sci-fi or fantasy, while the fictional worlds may not reflect reality, they often are responses to cultural norms and traditions unlike those we know in America—which means the genre is being enriched by having new types of stories and subjects introduced into it.”

Type(writer) Casting

Tom Hanks has sold a book of short stories loosely connected to photographs of the typewriters in his personal collection to Alfred A. Knopf.

Waiting on the Next Langdon Book

Dan Brown’s next novel will feature character Robert Langdon, but the bestselling author has warned fans it may be some time before the manuscript is ready.

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LBYR's Ling, who is cofounder of the Children's Book Council's diversity committee, has also noted some forward progress. "I've been seeing more high-profile SF/F series and books by people of color, and also more books featuring diverse characters," she says. "Not as much as we would want, but previously, if they existed, they weren't as prominent."

Those pushing for more diversity in SF/F, as well as across the industry, have allies, especially on the children's side. "A significant portion of our sales is driven by schools and libraries, and those are the places where they're helping us promote the message of inclusion and diversity," says Ginee Seo, children's publishing director at Chronicle. "Those educators on the front lines are seeing that diversity in the classrooms, and they're able to come back to us and say, 'This is what we need,' and we're able to respond." Among Seo's forthcoming SF titles is *Lowriders in Space* by Cathy Camper (Nov.), a graphic novel that features racially diverse characters and a female mechanic.

Beyond Race and Gender

Discussions of diversity often focus on authors and books that diverge from the white and the male. But the concept applies to attributes such as ability, too, and progress there is a bit slower.

Lois McMaster Bujold, whose accolades include four Hugos for Best Novel, launched her ongoing Miles Vorkosigan series of hard SF novels featuring a disabled protagonist in 1986. But only a few of the publishers *PW* spoke with named SF/F titles focusing on characters with physical disabilities or mental health issues, and of those, fewer still are on forthcoming lists. One of the few exceptions is *Night Sky* by Suzanne Brockmann and Melanie Brockmann (Sourcebooks Fire, Oct.), which features two strong female leads and a male supporting character who is African-American and uses a wheelchair.

The demand is there, as shown by the recent and very successful Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign for *Accessing the Future*, an SF anthology exploring disability and its intersections with race, class, gender, and sexuality. However, most publishers have yet to catch up. As Leibman points out, "From a business standpoint, [publishers] always want to see what's going to be the safe bet, and that tends to be very regressive. There can be a tendency to be more hesitant to represent diversity. If you can get people to engage with the material, though, they're very hungry for these books and they appreciate them."

Viola Carr's steampunk novel, *The Diabolical Miss Hyde* (Harper Voyager, Feb. 2015), a gender-swapped retelling of the Jekyll and Hyde story, features a schizophrenic heroine. "In a genre where magic incantations can heal all ills," Pomerico says, "portrayals of different mental and physical ability can be fascinating."

Though such depictions remain rare in SF/F, Tachyon publisher Jacob Weisman expresses optimism that the more such books publishers take a risk on, the more publishers will follow. "It just takes someone to really be successful," he says, "and I think the gates will open up."

The Future of Diversity

As popular culture takes more notice of what used to be considered "geeky" and offbeat, publishers may become complacent, thinking a few diverse titles address the problem. "As the art form itself stops struggling to make its voice heard," HarperCollins's Brown says of the speculative fiction genre, "its protagonists turn into people who don't often have to struggle to make their voices heard."

Yet Seo cautions that the battle is far from over. "Publishing houses want to embrace diversity, but they are coming up against the business side that doesn't want to deviate from history without a proven audience," she says. "You're constantly having to prove that putting a black or an Asian character on the cover of a book is not going to destroy sales."

"If you look at the trajectory of SF/F published for children, there have not been a great many characters of color," she continues. "Female characters are relegated to stereotypical roles. That's beginning to change, but even as female characters are taking on strong, lead roles, they still tend to be white."

Many editors are profoundly aware of the gaps where, even as diversity surges, certain characters are being overlooked. Arthur A. Levine, publisher of the Scholastic imprint of the same name, publishes Alaya Dawn Johnson, whose 2013 novel *The Summer Prince* is set in a postapocalyptic, matriarchal Brazilian society. But, he says, "I've almost never seen a contemporary Jewish character who I recognize. I'd like to see more contemporary Muslim characters, more characters with different physical abilities where the story is not didactic. There need to be stories, and that's a difficult literary accomplishment—to make a character who is richly three-dimensional." Whitman, meanwhile, says she has long expressed a desire to see a well-executed Asian steampunk novel.

Are these diverse stories out there, yet failing to find a home? Or is there an entirely untapped creative angle waiting to be explored? "I don't seem to get many submissions that actively promote looking at gender, race, sexuality, religion, age, and so on," Harper Voyager's Pomerico says. "That's not to say it's not out there, but we are looking for ways to be more proactive in finding such material."

Below, more on science fiction and fantasy.

Science Fiction & Fantasy 2014: The "Wonderful but Strange" New World of Ann Leckie


In 2012, Ann Leckie, who had by that time published several short stories yet remained relatively unknown to many readers, was putting the finishing touches on her debut novel, *Ancillary Justice*.

Science Fiction & Fantasy 2014: Sizing Up: Tor.com—the Imprint

Tor.com, a website started six years ago by speculative fiction publishing house Tor Books, is launching its own imprint.

Science Fiction & Fantasy 2014: A Selection of Related forthcoming SF/F Titles

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