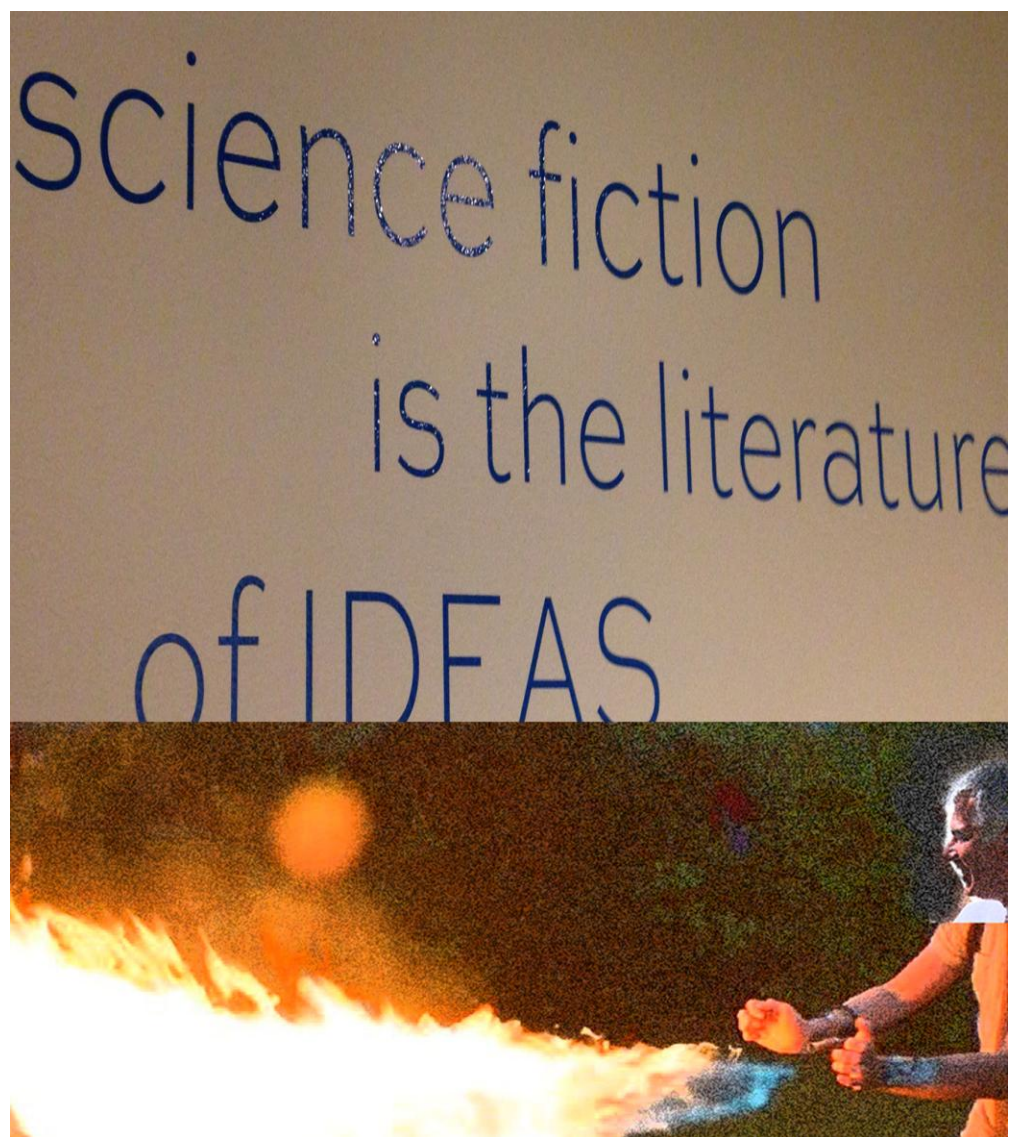


# SWILL



#26

Winter 2015

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# Editorial: A Middle Class Phenomenon

Neil Jamieson-Williams

Lester didn't like the proposed sacred cow scheduled to be slaughtered for this issue; so, we will go ahead with his instead -- as it is, perhaps, a better sacred cow and a target that permits me (at least) to sidebar onto my original along the way (though not in this editorial). The norm that shall be challenged in this issue is (for those who didn't look at the front cover) the statement that "science fiction is a literature of ideas".

This statement is one that has been used over the past half century or so to defend the genre against the contempt it receives from the literati and the high priesthood of the various literary establishments. On the surface, the defence has its merits; however, it is also a weak defence in that it is an overgeneralisation and begs the question, which ideas? The best work in our genre, may explore possibilities and push boundaries, it may be radical or subversive -- holding up dominant social paradigms and the current status quo for examination and critique -- or philosophical, it may ask the questions "what if" or "if this goes on", or it may place emphasis more on character and plot. While science fiction may explore big ideas, dangerous ideas drawn from either the natural sciences or the social sciences (or better still, both), most of the time, our authors are derelict in this duty -- and for good reason. Because, the readership/viewership does not want it. They do not want to be really challenged -- not at all. Oh, you can tweak their noses here and there, but if you actually push the envelope, if you challenge the normalised discourses of the genre on multiple areas, the audience will deem the work to be too "mainstream", "unrealistic", "difficult", etc. In other words, the kiss of death for any writer of commercial fiction, which science fiction is.

This is a subject that SWILL has touched on in the past, over the years, and here we are at it again. Perhaps a little different this time around. Malzberg said it best (my opinion):

"...science fiction is nothing -- anyone who ponders this for five minutes will see it clearly -- if it is not a middle-class phenomenon."<sup>1</sup>

And as science fiction IS a middle-class phenomenon, it will reflect the middle-class attitudes of the period it was written in. And the middle-class does not want to be challenged, period. Oh, they do want to be titillated, mildly jolted, maybe even have one or two of their buttons pushed, provided that they are also given some form of "techno-monkey" (see Lester's column) gosh-wow-sense-of-wonder. They are prepared to suspend disbelief so long as within that created science fictional world there is enough that remains familiar, i.e. most of it. No actual awesome jolts and never, ever, push all of their buttons. The readership, as a whole, will not stand for it, and will flee from the offending author (who better write a standard potboiler space opera for their next book to, partially, whitewash over the stain of failure for the sin of writing a novel that made a real attempt at cultural estrangement -- or face the stigma of now being unpublishable). Science fiction is a form of commercial literature. You can only get away with real cultural estrangement within the literary fiction genre and even then there are limits.<sup>2</sup>

One of the courses that I teach is Technology and Society and the General Education version of the course (taken as an elective) is usually filled with 40% Engineering/Computer Science students, 20% humanities students, 20% social science students, and 20% students for whom this is the only GenEd that fit in their timetables. The Engineering and CompSci students still tend to be the kids that would warm John W. Campbell's heart -- the eternal optimist "happy engineer" for whom technology is simply a problem solver and that any problems created by technology will be solved by more technology. The students from the Humanities usually tend to be of the "technology is evil" school of philosophy<sup>3</sup> and many of the social science students hold similar views and some of them are of the "technology is neutral" school.

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<sup>1</sup> "Come Fool, Follify"; 1980 (Engines of the Night: 1982 or Breakfast in the Ruins: 2001)

<sup>2</sup> One limit is that those who write within this genre usually lack a science background and/or are unfamiliar with science fiction tropes (it is good to know what the rules are and what has been done before, before you go breaking and bending them) which reduces the power of their worldbuilding and extrapolation.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, this is usually a selective viewpoint; technology is never evil when it is providing smartphones, tablets, game consoles, etc.

Now, this is their views concerning our present, existing technologies. All of them are completely blown away by the latter part of the course when we examine emerging technologies and their potential impacts

For example, it is very plausible that within twenty years time every home will have a 3-D printer/microfactory device<sup>4</sup> that can build items, not just out of plastic, but out of other materials, including biological material. Say you decide that you want a new suit (and we are also going to make the assumption that this is not the first time you have purchased clothing this way, so that your household computing device(s) already have your 3-D scanned personal size data in its memory), you go online and find a design you like, purchase the design, and download it (if it is open-sources, just download it). Now, using your personal data, you have the software customise it to be a perfect fit, then send it to your 3-D printer/microfactory device, and voila, in a few hours you have a brand new, perfectly tailored, suit to wear. Cool, right? Definitely, gosh-wow; not as fast or as cool as a Star Trek replicator, but pretty much the same thing, though on a more limited scale. But how would this impact society?

Well, it would end retail as we know it. It would end manufacturing as we know it. And give a major shit-kicking to the transportation industry (what do you think is in most of those transport trucks on the highway?). And this will lead to large scale job losses in our society. And what are we going to do with all those big-box stores and all those manufacturing plants and so on? And what kind of economic domino-effect will this have? And this is just a minor extrapolation of greater capabilities for an existing consumer product that has a current price point that is the same as or less than the cost of a personal computer was twenty years ago.

My students usually are at first amazed at the prospect of having this consumer product at their command. But when confronted with the potential impacts of this new tech, they become uncertain and some are horrified and worried regarding their own future employment.

However, whatever the future will be, it will be different and science fiction will -- for the most part -- fail to predict that

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<sup>4</sup> I use this term as this device as a consumer appliance would have to also have some limited robotic assembly features -- current 3-D printers are still for the at least the semi-skilled user and for anything more complicated than a fork, assembly is required.

future. And anyway, it is far more comfortable for science fiction to illustrate a future where things are not too different than today. Where today's middle-class sensibilities remain and the middle-class sensibilities of the recent past are mocked and critiqued. Where there is cheap interstellar travel, commodities to be shipped near and far, and a human suburban sprawl in our corner of the galaxy -- comfortable and middle class, of course (unless you are one those the lower class people which we won't discuss unless it is a "rags-to-riches" tale) -- and more a pleasant wish-fulfilment fantasy than science fiction. And most certainly, not a literature of ideas.

# Thrashing Truhen: Cultural (Un)Estrangement

Neil Jamieson-Williams

Back in December Charles Stross posted the article *On the lack of cultural estrangement in SF* on his blog. Lester brought this to my attention and it is the central theme of this issue of SWILL. Science fiction as a literature of ideas, really does tend to fail, when it comes to cultural estrangement; Stross deftly illustrates this in his article that even a one century backward temporal shift within the same culture (UK) would throw up many issues of cultural estrangement for a person from the early 21st century. His other criticisms are equally valid regarding the genre.

While I do enjoy the work of Peter Hamilton, I know from the get-go that I will be reading "Essex suburbia goes interstellar" and just hope that the plot and/or characters are sufficient enough to carry the ride to its conclusion; I have never bailed on a Hamilton mega-novel (yet), but I have been disappointed. Hamilton is not alone in committing the sin of cultural unestrangement, both Stross and MacLeod are also sinners (but, to a far lesser degree) and they, at least, provide reasons why this is so. "So why do repeatedly we see the depiction of far future societies with cheap interstellar travel in which this hasn't bought about massive social change as a side-effect (other than the trivial example of everyone having a continental sized back yard to mow)?" Stross asks...

A very good question, indeed. Let's take it apart.

"Depictions of far future societies" is open to discussion, given the current pace of technological change. Usually this is placed at 500 years or more from the present, though some still set the beginning of "far future" at 10,000 CE (which is definitely far, but a little too far in my opinion). Barring a runaway Singularity, I would hypothesise that the near future begins with tomorrow and ends roughly 150 years from now, meso future overlaps this beginning as early as 100 years from present to about 300 years from present, and far future overlaid again, beginning perhaps as early as 200 years from present. The big

questions here being, will there be some form of technological singularity, and if there isn't, will there be some form of technological plateau, or slow down.

Contrary to the boosterism of the technological optimists, if a technological singularity is not reached within the next two centuries, that means that the emerging technologies of bioengineering, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence (in whole or in part) will actually be more difficult to develop to maturity than the optimists currently predict. That will also mean that the exponential rate of technological advancement will stall or slow down rapidly. This has happened before, usually for cultural reasons -- that we have cultural blinders on, from our worldview, that prevent us from imagining a particular breakthrough, or from perceiving the utility of a specific technology, or our model of the universe is in error and we have yet to see that there is an error. However, even if our rate of technological advancement slows or stalls over the next two hundred years, we are still going to have some very powerful technologies available -- all of them being game-changers.

Bottom-line, even if the exponential rate of technological change grinds to a halt; societies, even a mere two hundred years from now are going to be strange from our early 21st century point of view. If 1915 is a sort of familiar yet alien world to a person from 2015; 2215 will probably be even more alien and less familiar. To continue with just one technology (the same one used in the Editorial 3D printing/microfacture) this technology is going to change everything and is being developed faster than initially expected.<sup>5</sup> However, its impact, even over the next 50 years, is going to be overwhelming. There is no way our current economic system can survive this technology without massive structural reforms<sup>6</sup> or a decent into corporate tyranny (and the latter is unsustainable).<sup>7</sup> What roads are taken will depend upon

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<sup>5</sup> *Synthesis of many different types of organic small molecules using one automated process* Science 13 March 2015

<sup>6</sup> When Lenin said, "The Capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them."; he may have been right, just not in the literal sense that he was speaking in. Industrial capitalism, in developing and implementing and marketing and advancing 3D printing -- all in the name of reducing labour and overhead -- may indeed have manufactured and sold the figurative rope that will terminate this economic system (at least as we currently know it).

<sup>7</sup> Yes, our current elites are strongly in favour of returning to their version of the "good old days", when the vast mass of ordinary people lived in poverty and deprivation (1915 is close enough, though they would like to turn the clock back to the 1870s) with little political power and a small wealthy elite ruled almost unopposed. This worked a century or so ago because the elite



individual nation states and their government-of-the-day, but within the nation-states that are democracies (or where the citizens still, at least, believe that they live in a democracy), it is more probable that massive reforms will occur. 3D printing will be a major job-killer and lead to massive adult unemployment and massive adult unemployment becomes a government problem and governments don't like the types of problems that can lead to civil unrest/revolution and democratic (real or facade) governments will tend to choose to make reforms (even if it angers those who donated to their election campaigns) rather than use state violence to quell real or potential unrest. Of course, this all depends upon the attitudes of the current leader and the party in power -- if this was a current problem here in Canada, our current Prime Minister and his party would opt for state violence over systemic reforms. Thing is, if this technology continues to develop at its current rate and reach maturity over the next thirty years (which it shows all probability of doing), 2075 may be as alien to a person from 2015 as is 1915. And this is only looking at a single technology.

One that that we can be very certain of, a society 200 years from the present, is going to have very little in common with a neo-liberal capitalist, suburban society of 2015. In all probability, a society in 2215 (if our technological civilisation does survive -- we could still crash the whole thing) will be a post-scarcity economy (maybe libertarian, maybe anarchist, maybe socialist, maybe all of the above) and residence patterns will vary between the culture(s) of each society and their individuals -- it will be a mix, a melange between urban and rural with very little suburban (the whole point of suburban being that you cannot afford to live in the urban centre, but do have to go there to work). As for 500 years or 1,000 years from the present -- it now starts to become highly improbable that there would be any society that is like a neo-liberal capitalist, suburban, representative democratic society of the early 21st century, period.

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still needed ordinary people to work the machines, etc. to produce the goods and services that made the elite wealthy. But, with advanced 3D printing, our labour is no longer needed. If the technology produces 40% to 60% adult unemployment, who is going to buy the goods and services to continue to keep the elite wealthy? And what are governments going to do with all the unemployed? And then there are the conspiracy theorists (both on the right and the left) who claim that the elite plan is to reduce the surplus population -- i.e. exterminate the majority of citizens -- to restore a balance (a kind of terminal market correction).

So far, I have just discussed potential societal changes over the next 200 years (usually not far future territory). What about space?

Space is hostile, space is hard. Even with mature 3D printing/microfactory, even with fully mature bioengineering, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence (sans runaway), interplanetary space travel and colonisation is going to be difficult -- doable and feasible -- but difficult. Will it ever be cheap? That would all depend upon drive capabilities. If the fuel is inexpensive and the velocities sufficient, it is conceivable that we could achieve drives that allow for travel from Earth to Mars (average distance) one-way within 9 days to a fortnight, which would place the entire solar system in our grasp as a species.

As for "cheap interstellar travel", that would require FTL that is inexpensive and does not necessitate mega-engineering on the scale of a near Type II civilisation. Thus, what we think we know about physics would have to be horribly incomplete or in error, for us to still have an, essentially, Type I civilisation capable of flitting about the galaxy at superluminal velocities. And, even then, nobody is going to bother with shipping Lemto cheese from one star to another -- they would just microfactory it at home. At the end of the day, even with current physics being wrong (thus permitting inexpensive, rapid, "magic box" FTL sans mega-engineering), even with our civilisation(s) remaining at a Type I level, even if we fudge things so that bioengineering/nanotechnology/artificial intelligence do not fully mature (just develop enough to make our lives more comfortable), this future interstellar civilisation is not going to be anything like an early 21st century society. Not one bit...

And so we stack the deck, descend into wish-fulfilment, etc. so that these societies ARE like an early 21st century society -- otherwise the editors and the readership would flee these shores for safer harbours within the genre. While fans, and editors, and critics, and writers may pay lip service to the genre being a literature of ideas (i.e. that this is part of our ideal culture); this is little more than an invocation or supplication in SF's real culture.

## Pissing on a Pile of Old Amazings

A mXModest Column by Lester Rainsford

Recently a \$BigNameProAuthor  
reXeXcXcXoXoXuXuXnXnXtXtXeXeXXddX complained that he'd  
stopped reading an 1100 page book 50 pAges before the end.  
The problem? Lack of 'culturla estrangement'. Translated  
from BigNameProQuthorese, this means, thousands of years  
into an interstellar future, it's the society of today. And  
for the BNPA that simply wasn't enough to hold his attention  
to the bitter end.

The claims of "SF is a literature of IDEAS!!" need to  
explain how this can be. Where are the ideas? Well, the  
ideas must be somewhere else, other than the society and the  
characters in the story. Maybe in the neat tech? To Lester,  
this kind of defence is going back to the Gernsback days,  
where a story idea could be, say, "what if we could develop  
a triode with intrinsic superheterodyning?" To certain  
obsessed geeks a triod with intrinsic superheterodyning is  
the cat's meow, but it's the sort of idea that's better  
fXoXrXXXa as a basis for an article in Home Radio Hobbyist  
than a basis for an 1100 page sci-fi epic.

Oddly, in the discussion that ensued over the BNPA's  
declaration, Lester did not see anyone posit that tX one  
glaring answer was right in the setup. A couple of other  
answers glare at Lester, and those are that: i) it's not  
1954 anymore; and ii) it's still not 1954 anymore.

If Lester grants that the author of the 1100 page book has  
some intelligence, skills, and craft, the pXrXoXbXlXeXmX  
answer to the problem, or at least one of them, is apparent.  
It's hard work thinking up a radically different future  
society, it's hard work thinking up how people will behave  
and interact, and it's impossible to get it right anyway.X--  
at least over the spread of 1100 pages. Even a skilled  
author will slip up, put in anachronisms, and will miss  
things that any number of alert readers will catch. Plus, it  
simply does not pay to think up an extremely detailed 4000-  
years-in-the-future society, and work out why everything is

the way it is, and then write a story in that background. It doesn't pay because it would take years, perhaps several lifetimes, and during those lifetimes technological change today will make certain of your assumptions about 6015AD obsolete, and you will get to start all over again. Ugh. So authors, who after all are trying to make a living at this kind of thing, cut corners. Take a vaguely modern society, trap it up with Cool Tech drapes, and assume that your "look! a mohkey!" misdirection holds readers' attention. The vaguely modern society makes it easier for both the author (because it's their default environment, it's easy to write about and comes naturally) and the reader (who is not puzzling out how an utterly unfamiliar society works and can possibly work). A placid SF reader isn't going to think; and in not thinking, the placid SF reader won't spot worldbuilding flaws and ask awkward questions about them.

Lester is a slow reader, and this makes him prone to thinking about the background and plot. This is rXaXrXeXlXyX never propitious to the enjoyment of the work. Complain, complain, complain--that's Lester's lot in SF reading life.

Another problem with the cultural background is that it's not 1954 anymore. Back in 1954, a huge swath of the SF authors had participated in World War II. This means they got sent to faraway places on short notice to do what they could in the war effort. In a few years, someone living on a farm that lacked electricity might be flying a state-of-the-art multiengine bomber with pressurization and remote-controlled gun turrets. How's that for cultural estrangement? Okay, maybe that's still Gernsbackian, but one way or another they also got to interact with different cultures, some of which may have been quite isolated before their territory became a key strategic asset. So after the war, these authors had some familiarity with diverse cultures and countries, and they could put it into their writing. OXkXaXyX,XXXsXoXXXWhen Jack Vance (who was in the merchant marine if Lester recalls correctly) puts a story on "Yap", maybe it really is the Yap that actually exists in the South Pacific. But, to the reader, at least the culture of a small island in the South Pacific is going to be a heck

of a lot less familiar than the culture of their home town and friends and neighbours. So, cultural estrangement is achieved.

Another problem with it not being 1954 anymore is that there are hardly any SF magazines these days, and the magazine market is barely more than a pimple iXnX on the body of annual SF publication, and that means that the short story is irrelevant today, except amongst the cognoscenti. Lester doesn't want to be part of the cognoscenti, but some days he feels there's little choice.

In a 3000 word short story or a 10,000 word novella, the author can put in a new idea, have a bit of fun with it, and be done. There is no need to come up with the enormous background information that's needed for an 1100 page novel, nor any need to worry, over each of those 1100 pages, that there's something inconsistent, either with the supposed future, or with the supposed future itself.

So, Lester's take on "why can't an 1100 page SF novel have cultural estrangement" is, are you kidding? Damn thing's impossible. Frank Herbert may have come close with Dune and CXhXiXlXDune Messiah, but how many times in SF has this feat been managed? Not very often! Not that Dune and Dune Messiah, both together, come anywhere close to 1100 pages. (Lester dXaXyXsX,Xsays, read those two, then stop. Your life will be better that way.) It's obvious that the 1100 page novel will have lots of padding, lots of overextended descriptions in ever-fractalling detail, and precious little in the way of a different society.

Lester guesses that the majority of today's SF writers make their living, one way or another, sitting in front of a keyboard staring at a computer screen. Of course the pro author is doing so in creation of their work, but for those who are not full-time, their "XrXeXaXlX"day" job is likely staring at the computer as well. So that's the kind of society and future they can imagine, and certainly that's the kind of society and future they find easiest, most natural, to write about. Gone are the days of being posted

to some obscure part of the world on some obscure mission that no one seems to know the details about. (For all the wXaXbXnXkXiXnXgX wanking about the Cloud and Big Data, World War II ran on paper and filing cabinets and carbon paper inserted in typewriters.)

Of course a superheterodyning triode is not enough technodressing to cloak an 1100 page novel with "literature of IDEAS" garb. But, throw in "food in a pill!" and "space will be AwesomeExcellent once pesky NASA gets out of the way!" and also "of course relativity is bunk", throw in a gadget or two (try not to be too obvious in ripping off Sapple/Samsung new product developments for the next year), and there you go. Look! A monkey! An IKEA monkey! (It's all ideas!)

To add insult to the injuries inflicted on Lester, when authors start playing with "let's make the culture strange", this all too often is code for "I got my ideas and fixation, and the world would run a goldarned lot better if it worked the way I would prefer it, so my new novel will feature the wonderful world where my kinks are perfectly respectable and accepted aXnXdX nay desired by all!"

That is Heinlein in a nutshell. Particularly late Heinlein, but it was there right in his earliestmX, previously unpublished work For Us the Living. Of course Heinlein is far from the only pinata that can be beaten with this particular stick--Lester is, for example, not particularly fond of Delany's obvious fascination with cracked knuckles and thick fingernails. Again, that's obvious in Delany's later work, but hints show up in the good earlier stuff, such as Nova.

As long as readers fall for "look! a technomonkey!" tricks, and demand 1100 page novels (fourth bXoXoXkX volume of the googoplexian epic!), SF won't be a literature of ideas. It simply can't be. If it wants to be, it needs to change. Somehow, Lester figures that the interests of authors to be published and to be paid will overbalance the need to justify, with concrete examples, that SF is a "literature of ideas".

# Flogging a Dead Trekkie:

## Violating the Taboos Norms of Science Fiction

### Part 9 of 8 – Three Extra Taboos

Neil Jamieson-Williams

Ah, I forgot that in "Thus Our Words Unspoken" in the second half of Breakfast in the Ruins (the material written in the early 2000s) Malzberg introduces three additional Taboos of Science Fiction. And, in the case of this trio, the word taboo is applicable over norm violation. All three are strongly linked to biology and raise the hotly debated questions of Nature vs. Nurture in regards to cultural traits and individual and collective behaviour. All three ask us to look at traits, usually seen as repugnant within Western industrial societies (though not perhaps for those who are members of the Conservative Party or USA Republicans), in a positive light -- i.e. that from an evolutionary perspective, they have survival value.

The three additional taboos are: XENOPHOBIA as a species survival mechanism, BIOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE aka "Biology is destiny", and RAPE AS THE PERPETUATION OF BIOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS WHICH COULD NOT OTHERWISE CARRY FORTH. Pretty, eh?

Let's deal with the most repugnant first, NORM VIOLATION TEN (aka TABOO 3: this is indeed the reproductive strategy for the dominant males in a chimpanzee troop; male initiated gendered aggression is common among chimps. While there have been some studies that do indicate that sub-dominant males in a chimpanzee troop do use rape as a reproductive strategy, sub-dominant males more often employ bribery and stealth as method of containing their genetic line (they bribe a female in oestrus, with food, to follow them into the bush away from the group). Any claim that this is how our pre-human ancestors behaved, has to be

questioned. Just because chimpanzees behave this way, doesn't lead to the conclusion that the last common ancestor between humans and chimps possessed this behaviour. After all, bonobos don't; instead they use consensual sex as conflict resolution. The split in the chimp/bonobo line occurred roughly 1.5 million years ago and the human/ancestral chimp line diverged messily (diverging, then hybridisation, then a final split) between 7 and 5 million years ago. The ancestral chimp (precursor to both the chimpanzee and the bonobo) could easily have had a behavioural pattern closer to that of the bonobo than what is seen in the contemporary chimpanzee. It is quite probable that the more aggressive behaviour of the chimpanzee came after the divergence 1.5 million years ago.

The same can be said regarding NORM VIOLATION EIGHT (aka TABOO 1). While the chimpanzee does engage in xenophobic behaviour, bonobos do not. Humans fit, somewhere in the middle and, at our worst, we do exhibit chimpanzee level xenophobia made more destructive by our technology. At our worst, that is; keep in mind that the majority of the human population does not consider people like Thomas of Torquemada, Oliver Cromwell, Talaat Pasha, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, Augustin Bizimungu, etc. to be exemplars -- they are aberrations. They would be chimpanzee exemplars, though. If we were as xenophobic as the chimpanzee, we would not have survived the 20th century. (even without nuclear weapons) there would have been a H. G. Wells type of total and endless war with 1920s technology fought to the bitter end of societal collapse worldwide -- with nuclear weapons, probable extinction. We are more co-operative than the chimpanzee and not as co-operative as the bonobo; we are less aggressive than the chimpanzee and more aggressive than the bonobo; we are less xenophobic than the chimpanzee and more xenophobic than the bonobo. And, we are more intelligent than both the bonobo and the chimpanzee.

Is xenophobia a survival trait? I don't know. It has been selected in the past; after all, it is not a trait that is necessarily maladaptive<sup>8</sup> so long as you are hunter-gatherers or

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<sup>8</sup> Note: often a culture's name for themselves within their own language translates as "the people" or "the human beings" meaning that "others" are not...



small scale horticulturalists, or pastoral herders. That is until your society starts to get big, about 5,000 people or more -- then it can be problematic. Once you move to intensive agriculture, and the dawn of civilisation and empire and cosmopolitan living, xenophobia may be handy for your warriors, but you certainly don't want that trait within the general population, certainly not among your peasants. In fact, we have been domesticating ourselves over the past 7,000 years (or at least the past 5,000 years) as our local population sizes increased -- we weren't doing this intentionally, but we were doing it nevertheless. Because we have xenophobic traits, this is why it is a common trope within SF that we use this trait to unite humankind against the alien menace -- you are just expanding the membership from tribe/nation-state to species. If the cosmos is a nasty, nihilistic social environment -- if people like the late Carl Sagan are horribly wrong about the behaviour of other intelligent species<sup>9</sup>, then xenophobia (a moderate amount) may indeed be a survival trait.

NORM VIOLATION NINE (aka TABOO 2)-- the old Freud statement that biology is destiny is at the root, the centre, of each of these three violations/taboo in a nutshell. How much of our behaviour is written in our biology and how much is learned behaviour. We do not know all the answers here. While biology is indeed important, it is not the sole determiner of destiny. Environment plays a critical factor regarding epigenetics and for species like ourselves, culture also plays a major role in our destiny. The biological imperative or biological determinism is, at present, a less strong of an argument than it was fifteen years

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<sup>9</sup> That other intelligent species would be non-hostile, wise guides for newer intelligences. Some may indeed be; but, not all. Neither would they all be the uber-rapacious species that want to strip our biosphere, or process us as food, or occupy our planet, though some species may be like that. But, those species would be viewed as pests by older, more powerful, species -- pests that must be contained or, if necessary, eradicated. Or maybe what is common is something in-between: it's like an American "wild west" out there, where almost anything goes, so long as you don't piss off/attract the interest of the transcendent AIs or whatever form the "ancient ones" take. That means that "savages" such as ourselves would be fair game to be exploited by species that are just a few centuries or so more technologically advanced than us. In short, other species may be nasty and xenophobic and there may be no galactic federation to protect our rights...

ago. Yes, biology is important, but biology isn't everything -- at least not yet.

We have been engaged in a human domestication programme for several thousand years, most of the time unintentionally and unknowingly. Across the span of millennia, only recently -- the past 150 years -- have we begun to understand the mechanisms involved, so our direction has been erratic. Up until now, there was still some level of randomness, some degree of natural selection being employed (though increasingly modified and mitigated by culture). That could all change in the near future. Once we figure out how to work epigenetics and genetics at will - human guided biology will be destiny. The big question though; who will be at the controls?

# Scribbling on the Bog Wall: Letters of Comment

Neil Jamieson-Williams

As I write this, there is one LoC from the usual suspect (Lloyd) and two reviews. My comments are, of course, in glorious pudmonkey.

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January 14, 2015

Dear Neil:

Sorry it's taken a while. thanks for issue 25 of Swill, and congrats on 25 issues! I see to celebrate, you are taking on SF's most vicious target. Good luck on this one.

As it turns out, no sound and no fury, not even a whimper...

Harlan was once an Angry Young Man, but has become an Angry Old Fart. Yet, he recently shook off a stroke like it was a head cold, so maybe he really is a force of nature. And whatever you might say about him, should he find out, I wouldn't put coming up here to find you past him. (And as I read on, I see you agree with me. Don't poke the crankyman with a stick.) Don't hit him with anything about the Last Dangerous Visions. that little gem is close to 40 years old, I think, and some of his contributors have died waiting for him to get on with it. Has no one dared to smack this old man, even when he was younger? A sound thrashing/ass-kicking might have changed him for the better.

Hey, this is SWILL. We will poke the crankyman with a stick, regardless of all warnings. I will face the music, should it come to that. His Angry Old Fartness rarely visits the Great White North and probably would consider it beneath him to respond to SWILL in any manner

(other than a lawsuit). I retract nothing from SWILL #25. Bring it on Harlie-boy...

I have read SF written by feminists, and it can be very good, with some clear messages. I am told to listen to their messages, and I try, but often the messages relayed by different groups are confused to the point of being contradictory. That says to me that both genders are confused as to the best way to sexual equality.

I think that feminist SF is still a work in progress, i.e. it is still evolving. While I do support there being a feminist SF; as a reader, I am neutral. I have disliked more works of feminist SF that I have read than there being works that I have liked and enjoyed. I tend to be frugal when this happens and I am more willing to try feminist SF short fiction than make the investment regarding novel-length works.

I'm still the only one to respond to this zine? How many readers do you have, anyway? I hope more than just me. Genrecon vs. ConBravo? Genrecon reminded me and Yvonne of old Ad Astras from years past. We had a great time, and we made some money, too. ConBravo, we were there to see what it was like. not much in the way of programming, but one gigantic dealers' room. As a potential vendor for this year, I've got to say good, and there's opportunity for a profitable weekend. I hope to get to both conventions in 2015.

ConBravo was nothing more than a dealers room and, for the admission price, not worth the effort. For this type of tradeshow con, I'd rather trek down to Toronto for Fan Expo.

The newer fandoms I have become involved with are steampunk, which doesn't take it self seriously, which is part of the fun, and the fandom surrounding the CBC show Murdoch Mysteries. we've been on the ground floor for this, and we see the same things happening in it as happened in SF fandom. lots of friends made, organizations, get-togethers and major events, and yes, even the obsessed fan that makes the production company wonder about the whole lot of us. Adaptation it is, and we're still sticking around to see how it all boils down.

Shrug. Steampunk, sort of interesting, but not actually my thing... I know that you both really are strong fans of Murdoch Mysteries -- I am not, and we will leave it at that.

Yes, we will be at Ad Astra, and we have taken a dealer's table, to see if we can sell some more steampunk and neoVictorian jewelry, sit on our butts all weekend, and enjoy a leisure-filled weekend. We will see you there. Let me know when the next issue is planned, and I can be a little better prepared for its arrival.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

See you at Ad Astra...

Amazing Stories  
The Clubhouse: Fanzine Reviews: Into the Abyss.  
R. Graeme Cameron  
January 2, 2015

SWILL (#25) - Autumn 2014 - Find it here

Faned: Neil Williams. Canadian Perzine.

This is very much a Curmudgeon zine in that it is written by perhaps the most iconoclastic fan in zinedom. Poor lad can't help it, what with carrying on a tradition he first established in the 1980s and has now renewed with his reborn SWILL.

Let me quote from his editorial (though bear in mind he is temporising here): "In March 26th, 2014 I decided that in keeping with the unannounced theme-arc of SWILL 2014 - that of norm violation and attacking sacred cows - that the Autumn issue would be an anti-Ellison issue. On October 10, 2014, Harlan Ellison @ suffered a stroke, which was announced in the media on October 12th. Even I, the evil anti-fan editor, did consider changing the planned autumn 'trash Ellison' issue, due to his illness. However, as the updates continue to come in, it would appear that Ellison is recovering well, that his mind has been unaffected, and that his physiotherapy is making progress - and, he is already writing again. As this is the situation, and, after all, as this is SWILL, there is no longer any concern, on my part, that I am kicking-someone-when-they-are-already-down. This is not as mean spirited as it sounds..."

Neil goes on to admit he admires much of Ellison's writings, but finds Harlan's attitude toward fans, indeed, entire generations of fans, to be reprehensible and without merit. Coming from someone who is "anti-fan" himself, this is interesting. I would say Neil considers Ellison to be "too much" of a curmudgeon.

No Graeme, you got me wrong here. Yes, I do admire Ellison's works. But, I also admire Ellison's attitude toward fandom -- definitely a sort of "kindred spirit", so to speak. I take exception to Ellison's general misanthropy, that he doesn't always practice what he preaches, has an

American-centric worldview, and does not always behave well in public...

Frequent guest editorialist Lester Rainsford (the title of his regular column is "Pissing on an Old Pile of Amazings") carries on the theme, writing:

"Do you know that there is one person in the world who ever got ripped off by other people?... one person with the guts and the clear-headed orneriness to declare that he got ripped off and oppressed by the Man right in public?... one person in the whole entire world who has held on to Artistic Integrity when all the luddite know-nothing philistines have sold out to mammon and convenience?... and moreover has declared that he has been hard done by, and deserves the greatest of praise and respect thereby, to right the wrongs done to him?"

Yes, Lester's modest column is so underappreciated."

But to hear Harlan Ellison talk about this, he is even worse done by."

Neil and Lester and Harlan at their best (or worst?) are kindred spirits. Certainly none of them pull any punches. Not ever.

The letter of comment column has but one participant. You guessed it. Lloyd Penney.

Swill worth reading? - Hell, yes! If, that is, like me, you find over-the-top editorializing exhilarating and exciting. That's why I like Ellison in full fury. Even when he's wrong he's vastly entertaining and guaranteed to shake you out of your doldrums. Neil and Lester likewise.

On the other hand, SWILL is definitely an acquired taste and not for everyone. If you have high blood pressure reading SWILL could give you apoplexy. So beware.

One thing's for sure. Never a dull issue. Not one.

Graeme, thank you for your review and understanding (Lester, in particular, thanks you for noticing how unappreciated he is). What I always like about your commentary is that you actually get the concept of SWILL. And yes, SWILL is most definitely an acquired taste, one that did not seem to sit too well on the palette of our next reviewer...

The zine dump  
No. 33  
A zine about zines  
by Guy h. Lillian III

Swill #25 / Neil Jamieson-Williams, swill.uldunemedia.ca / The issue dates to last August, but only today blossomed in my e-mailbox.

Somewhat confused here, comrade... I did send you an email back in May with a link to SWILL #23 plus a link to our back issues. I also sent you a link to SWILL #24 in September. And in mid December I sent you an email with the link to SWILL #25; regardless, you did review SWILL #25 -- thanks.

Devoted to "norm violation and attacking sacred cows," according to the editor, this is an "anti-Ellison," as in Harlan Ellison, issue, with further pieces on "Trashing Trufen", "Flogging a Dead Trekkie", and "Pissing on a Pile of Old Amazings". Considering the mild flavor of this issue's fanzines, with little in the way of controversy, this should make Swill (founded 1981, it says here) a welcome diversion. Certainly the antique and purposefully blotchy typewriter fonts convey a rebellious, defiantly trashy attitude.

SWILL in its current incarnation normally has the following features/columns: Editorial, Thrashing Trufen, Pissing on a Pile of Old Amazings, Flogging a Dead Trekkie, Scribbling on the Bog Wall, and Endnote -- each of which, with the exceptions of Pissing on a Pile of Old Amazings and Scribbling on the Bog Wall, have a unique subtitle each issue. SWILL was founded in 1981, see the back issues, Original SWILL.

Anyway, after an acknowledgment of Harlan's recent poor health and insistence that his recovery makes him again, fair game, Jamieson-Williams does indeed go after him. Despite admiring much of his writing, Neil calls Ellison a misanthrope who thinks all human beings are scum, a "yellow journalist" for not checking his sources adequately, and finally an "arsehole," just on general principles.

Yes, I did do all of that. I take full responsibility and make no apologies...

Moving on to trufen, Neil's article is mostly more Harlan; a sharper jab comes in the lettercol from Lloyd Penney: "You may have to ease up on the trufen these days ... they seem to be mostly in their 70s and 80s, and they are cranky, and they need their meds and their sleep."

Unclear as to whether you are discussing Trashing Trufen (the subtitle of the piece this issue is An Archetypical Anti-Fan and is actually more in praise of Ellison than against him) or Scribbling on the Bog Wall (the lettercol).

Amidst the strikeouts, contributor Lester Rainsford is supposed to pee on Amazing, but also tries to trash Harlan. I can't figure out what this has to do with Amazing.

Ah, you neither understand the context or the mystery... I cannot explain the mystery as even I do not know the true reason why Lester chose this as the title of his column. I can explain the context, Pissing on a Pile of Old Amazings, has been the title of Lester's column since SWILL #1 in 1981.

Again taking up the typewriter, Neil ponders genuine feminist SF, admitting that he doesn't know what that means. I feel his pain; I don't know what Swill means. Says Neil, "Swill has always been very adept at prodding at soft spots and pushing buttons in the past." Balloon-poppers in an oft-pompous venue such as fandom are always welcome, but effective iconoclasy needs specifics to back up the button-punching, and here I mostly see nastiness for its own sake. Well, try me again.

Ah, well SWILL has often been accused over the years of being nasty or mean just for the sake of being mean and nasty. We do not deny this -- it is part of the spirit of SWILL -- though we also believe that we offer valid criticism along with the mean and nasty iconoclasm. Do try SWILL again, or even look over some of the back issues...

*[I'm prejudiced here; I genuinely admire Harlan Ellison and miss those days of The Glass Teat and Dangerous Visions (though I yearn for the final volume too) when he was the hope of the field. As for his personality, well, he gave me a boost when I was a kid that I have neither forgotten nor fulfilled, and I number him with Alfred Bester, Julie Schwartz, Fred Chappell, Lillian Hellman, and a zillion people no one's ever heard of as mentors to whom I owe an unpayable debt.]*

*I am probably more in agreement with you than you think. SWILL has often praised Ellison and defended his position on certain issues. It was deemed time to also take some pokes at him, as he is indeed fallible. As stated in the issue, the concept of an Anti-Ellison issue was conceived back in March 2014 and publication of the Autumn issue was delayed almost two months, just to make certain that he was actually recovering.*



# Endnote: The KD<sup>10</sup> of Literature

Neil Jamieson-Williams

Science fiction could be a literature of ideas, but most of the time it is not, period. Some of the time, an attempt is made, and more often than not, the attempt fails. It may fail in that it is preachy -- this is the way the author thinks that the world should be like -- or, less often, it is too strange, but not literary enough, and thus never finds an audience. And some of the time, the attempt is successful, only to be swept into the trashbin by the passage of time and rapid technological change -- it becomes dated. Most of the time, though; the goal is not even attempted.

I have discussed this before in issues past (and in previous incarnations of SWILL), both Lester and I have touched on it this issue. And I will now say it again. A true "literature of ideas" science fiction novel would have the average SF fan running for cover. It would not find a publisher (not as big a problem today with self-publishing) and would have difficulty finding an audience. It would have to have enough literary elements within it to spark any interest among the literati (who would accept the strangeness of a true SF world provide that the conventions of their genre were also met). There may be some SDF reader who would read the book and enjoy it, most would hate it and post their venomous screeds (in a SWILL-like fashion) all over the internet and in particular at Amazon, ChaptersIndigo, and Kobo.

Professional writers, those who do this for a living, really like to get paid for their work -- this is their job, their source of income -- and are not usually going to write career-killing novels (or this is a mistake they make once, and then never again) or demand that their publisher publish this far future novel that is virtually incomprehensible to the average reader (because no publisher is going to intentionally publish something that they know they are going to lose money on -- publishers like to receive paycheques too). Oh, yes; you can shout out, where is

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<sup>10</sup> For Americans and other foreigners; Kraft brand macaroni and cheese is marketed as Kraft Dinner in Canada and for Canadians, all macaroni and cheese that comes in a box that you make yourself is called Kraft Dinner, or KD for short.

the art? Have you no ethics? Have you no integrity? But, face it; part of being an adult is that you learn to choose your battles and to know when to fight and when to retreat.<sup>11</sup> And guess what; even I do not want to read a steady diet of difficult, weird, truly alien human cultural setting novels. Maybe one or two a year, and that's it -- and thank the gods for self-publishing because it can allow our professional writers to experiment, should they choose to do so, now and again.

I read more than SF, I do read some political thrillers and mysteries, and I do read mainstream (actually the current novel I am reading is mainstream Canadian fiction); but most of what I read is SF. I like the juxtaposition that SF presents, it may just be one of Lester's "techno-monkeys" or it may have greater substance, whatever, it sparks my interest. A good writer will, most of the time, be able to carry me along right to the conclusion. But, in the end, most SF is literary comfort food; most SF is the KD of literature.

### **Pith Helmet and Propeller Beanie Tour**

April 2015 Ad Astra - Toronto (actually, the wilds of Markham...)

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<sup>11</sup> I learned this working in radio -- a collaborative medium -- on a sub-miniscule budgets (which allowed for a greater degree of writer creative control, because there wasn't a lot of money involved, but unlike the prose writer, you really do have to work, and be able to work harmoniously, with other people to get the final series/show made). My forays into film never really amounted to much, other than money -- everybody knows this now, but just in case you are one of the few who don't -- the media conglomerates buy (don't know the current ratio) way more scripts than they ever produce into a movie. Only five of my scripts ever got the green light and only one made it into principal photography (by which time, it had been so heavily re-written that I no longer had a credit on it (the original script was a drama and the shooting script was a teen comedy) and it went direct to video and I am not going to name it (to protect both the innocent and the guilty) and, anyway, all that was left from the original script was the world (that had been dumbed down and rendered into pre-fab food) and the inciting incident. But, I did get paid...

