

## Books in Review

Edited by Christy Tidwell & Bridgitte Barclay

*Gender and Environment in Science Fiction.*

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Reviewed by: Sarah Powell Price

This carefully curated collection of essays by Christy Tidwell and Bridgitte Barclay examines the unique and fascinating ways that nature and gender interact within the science fiction genre. The collection engages readers to question what is both possible and natural in how intricately humans, animals, and their environments are connected. In turn, this prompts questions about how human and nonhuman representations and interactions provide a deeper understanding of gender, sexuality, social norms, and the very definition of autonomous self.

The book surveys a wide range of science fiction works, including examples from the 1820s through the mid-20th century, as well as more contemporary stories. Within these works, we encounter many of the expected problematic social narratives within science fiction, including how women or non-traditional genders are represented, portrayed, and vilified within a world of hypermasculinity. Rather than simply extricate and dissect the flawed patterns of stereotypes and misogyny, Tidwell and Barclay isolate ways in which the modern feminist and LGT-BQ+ audiences can use interpretive and subversive techniques such as “Camp” (the idea of embracing works as over-the-top irony, frivolity, and artful impertinence) to reclaim control of the narrative.

Split into four intersecting parts, Barclay and Tidwell have selected essays that address a gap in scholarship between the subgenres of environmental sci-fi and feminist sci-fi through a series of academic, intersectional conversations.

Part I, “Performing Humanity, Animality and Gender,” focuses on depictions of woman-animal hybrids, artificial intelligences, “technologies personified and

gendered as female,” and other inter-species embodiments of femininity. This section’s overarching concern is how ideas and interpretations of natural gender in science fiction are inextricably intertwined with the environments in which they exist, and how control of these environments (or lack thereof) can have, quite literally, monstrous consequences, such as those illustrated in *Wasp Woman* (1959), *Mesa of Lost Women* (1953), and the film, *Ex Machina* (2014), in which “[a]ttempts to control—and to control women in particular—are punished.”

In Part II, “Gendering the Natural World,” Tidwell and Barclay have curated essays by Fernando Berns, Juan Juve, and Steve Asselin that analyze narratives spanning from Mary Shelly’s 1826 apocalypse novels to *The Last Man to Womaneaters* (1958) and *The Gardener* (1974). The writers examine how these films engender the natural world and sexualize both nature’s antagonism and the species within nature itself.

Part III, “Contemporary Queering,” builds on the continued narratives outlined above to further explore the element of gender fluidity and queering within species and within nature. Using the novel *2312* by Kim Stanley Robinson as a point of analysis, the essay by Tyler Harper argues that terraforming and modifications of both gender and body can be interpreted within a framework where such transformations provide a freedom from gender strictures and environmental catastrophe.

Finally, Part IV, “We Don’t Need Another Hero,” explores science fiction stories that challenge human/non-human boundaries, hypermasculinity and its impact on gender binaries, including the tradition-

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al superhero narratives of Silver Age comic books such as *Aquaman* (1959) and *Metamorpho* (1965), as well as more modern feature films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).

Even for the non-academic science fiction enthusiast, Barclay and Tidwell's book provides a strong LGBTQ+-positive interpretive lens that may enhance enjoyment of some of the more problematic works that it examines. While gender stereotypes and patriarchal depictions are all too easily amplified within even some of the more recent sci-fi narratives (including *Her* (2015) and previously cited *Ex Machina*), the overarching narrative of these collective essays and the conversations between them is that power also lies in the perspective of the beholder—in this case, the feminist and LGBTQ+ audience.

*Gender and the Environment in Science Fiction* contains a well curated and representative collection of essays that successfully tap into unexplored

avenues within the inextricable, interconnectedness of gender and the environment, while also re-centering the nuances and messages of the stories at their center. The book highlights the need for new narratives to override the traditional problematic themes within science fiction, replacing them with a storytelling approach that is both inclusive and intersectional.

Perhaps most impactful is how Barclay and Tidwell illustrate that problematic hegemonic masculinity within representations of gender and environments in science fiction may, in fact, be reshaped into unintended and even redemptive narratives supporting the feminist, LGBTQ+-positive, and ecocritical voice. Stories revisited at with a modern twist empower the informed reader to use interpretive strategies to restructure and take control of the narrative while still embracing the unavoidable interconnectedness between gender and the environment.