DECODING GENDER IN SCIENCE FICTION

BRIAN ATTEBERY

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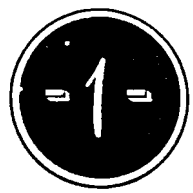

SECRET DECODER RING

When this project began to take shape, I was surprised to find myself writing a book about gender and science fiction. There were already so many good studies out there, I thought. All the material has been covered. I'm not the person to do it. But every time I started researching a particular theme or period of science fiction, gender issues were shaping the fiction in weird, powerful ways that no one seemed to have mentioned. In the end, I gave up and decided to write about that interplay.

Science fiction is a useful tool for investigating habits of thought, including conceptions of gender. Gender, in turn, offers an interesting glimpse into some of the unacknowledged messages that permeate science fiction. Each reads the other in very interesting ways. Examining stories with a view to both their science-fictional qualities and their uses of gender generates new questions about both gender and genre. Then those questions can be addressed to those and other stories to yield further insights. The process is a particularly rewarding version of the hermeneutic circle—a decoding ring.

Both gender and science fiction are rather vexed terms: each is marked by rancorous debate over what it means, how it came to mean what it seems to mean today, what is allowed to count as part of it, how it ought to be studied—and who gets to speak to these issues. In his study of *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy,* Gary K. Wolfe lists thirty-three defi-

nitions for science fiction, many of them directly contradictory. Some, for instance, consider it a subset of fantasy, while others see fantasy as a branch of science fiction. Definitions of gender are equally controversial. Is it a grammatical term, a synonym for sexual differentiation, a class system, or, as Kate Bornstein has suggested only half facetiously, a cult (Bornstein 103)?

Donna Haraway points out that even the distinction between social *gender* and biological *sex,* central to many discussions of the topic, is meaningless in languages such as German, in which a single term indicates both (128). In French, to complicate matters further, one can distinguish gender from sex but not from literary form. What is your *genre:* masculine, feminine, or science fiction?

Among multiple definitions, I have chosen ones that treat both gender and science fiction as sign systems. Gender is a way of assigning social and psychological meaning to sexual difference, insofar as that difference is perceived in form, appearance, sexual function, and expressive behavior. Science fiction is a system for generating and interpreting narratives that reflect insights derived from, technological offshoots of, and attitudes toward science. These rather stiff and wordy descriptions are not the only legitimate definitions for either term. They are not even necessarily the ways I find myself using the words in conversation. I offer them as clarification of my method, as a way of saying "if we define gender this way and science fiction thus, we can make these discoveries."

My choice is partly determined by the double subject matter: these are definitions that highlight the relationships between science fiction and gender and place the two categories on comparable footings. In addition, I like to think in terms of signs because decades of reading SF have given me the habit of looking at my fellow humans as interestingly weird creatures, alien beings. The first thing to do in confronting a dangerous alien is to figure out what it means by beeping or waggling its antennae. Before we can program the universal translator, we have to learn the code.

Both gender and science fiction, then, can be seen as codes: cultural systems that allow us to generate forms of expression and assign meanings to them. Both codes overlap with and depend on language itself, the master code through which all other cultural systems are transmitted, verified, and (as I am doing here) analyzed. Whenever we call something a code, we are implicitly making a comparison between it and language. We begin to look for individual "words" or signs; we expect to find a "grammar" for organizing those signs; we identify social and linguistic contexts within which those signs have meaning, and we interpret or "translate" individual "messages."

Codes have another interesting property. They can be used to send a message and at the same time to conceal it from those who are not conversant with the code. The Navajo code talkers of World War II are a famous example of the way a linguistic code can become a secret code when a group

of insiders makes use of it in front of outsiders. Both gender codes and the specialized vocabulary and narrative techniques of science fiction frequently fulfill the social function of marking boundaries between those who know the code and those who don't. One can easily label oneself an outsider by misusing a key element—by, for instance, wearing an earring in the wrong place or abbreviating science fiction as sci-fi rather than SF.

The gender code is vastly more pervasive than that of SF. Like language, it is something we start learning the day we are born. Its rules and processes become part of the structure of consciousness, so that we find it difficult to think consciously about it. It is rooted in biology but shaped by culture to such a degree that it is impossible to untwist the thread and say which strands are inborn—and which are acquired and arbitrary. There is no "natural gender" any more than there is a natural language.

Like individual speech sounds, one gender is meaningful only to the degree that it differs (or is treated as if it differs) from another. Speech features are conveniently sorted into binary oppositions: voiced and voiceless consonants, active and passive verbs. Likewise, gender is usually conceived as a pair of mutually exclusive "opposites": masculine and feminine. Such a schematic diagram is just about as true to the range of individual expressions of gender as a structural diagram of phonemes is to the full range of sounds people actually produce. If you are from rural Georgia and I from Northern Ireland, our versions of the word "bird" will hardly resemble one another, even though most speakers of English will understand them as variations on the "same" sound. Just so, my way of expressing masculine gender barely overlaps with those of a Masai warrior or a Mormon patriarch. We all act out the signifiers "man," "husband," "father," and "son," according to our own regional and personal dialects. Most of what we have in common is the degree to which we differ from our various cultures' definitions of the feminine. Legal systems and other institutions typically respond to simplified "phonemic" expression of gender while disregarding "phonetic" differences in expressing it.

The gender code permeates the linguistic one: masculine, feminine, and neuter are, after all, grammatical terms. Within most cultures, when women and men speak, they make slightly different stylistic choices among linguistic possibilities, and even when a man and a woman utter the same sequence of words, listeners are likely to interpret their meanings differently. The differences are rarely to the woman's advantage: he is being forceful, we say, but she is shrill; he is asking for directions, she is issuing a sexual invitation.

Nonverbal signs in the gender code can include clothing, hairstyles, cosmetics, posture, gesture, vocal pitch and inflection, use of chemicals to mask or enhance body odors, and patterns of eye contact. Within this code, the body itself becomes a sign. Its meaning shifts according to presentation and context.

Signs within the gender code are fairly easy to pinpoint, but it is another matter to decide what is being signalled. Take something like a shaved head.

Depending on whose head it is and what other signs are present, it may denote aggression (for instance in skinheads), helplessness (in concentration camps), conformity (in military contexts), nonconformity, sexual availability, lesbian separatism, hypermasculinity, a medical condition, youth, age, or effacement of gender. The sign may even indicate more than one meaning at a time. The meanings it points to may themselves be signs representing some further meaning: for instance, the bald head may be a sign of androgyny, but androgyny itself (as I will discuss later) is nothing but a sign and a particularly slippery one at that.

Hollywood has offered us quite an array of bald heads, each signifying something different. In *Star Trek: The Motion Picture,* actress Persis Khambatta's shiny scalp was a sign of sexual availability, whereas Mira Furlan's Delenn, in the series *Babylon V,* became sexually desirable only after a metamorphosis that replaced her alien baldness with human locks. Sigourney Weaver's shaved skull in *Alien*[3] was part of her distancing from ordinary humans, while the baldness of Captain Jean-Luc Picard, played by Patrick Stewart on *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* contributed to the character's grave and vulnerable humanity, especially in contrast with the various ridges and ruffles that indicate alien races in the *Star Trek* universe.

In printed science fiction, even more than in the movies, the generic code proves to be apt at revealing aspects of the gender code that are usually exhibited, shall we say, less baldly. The genre's storytelling conventions encourage writers to ask questions about the biological basis of sexual division and allow them to explore alternative formulations of society and the individual psyche. The code, in other words, generates utterances along the lines of "What if X were the case instead of Y?" or "What happens if we follow X to its logical conclusion?" The Y's and X's that are being explored may be laws of physics and new inventions, or they may well be chromosomes and marriage customs.

Furthermore, these explorations take place within another code, that of narrative. The nature of storytelling demands that ideas be embodied in characters within social contexts, undergo alteration over time, be aligned in patterns of conflict, and achieve some sort of resolution. This is a powerful set of operations. Societies use mythic stories to express their relationship to the world. Historians have begun to notice that narrative is an essential part of the cognitive equipment of their discipline no less than it is of literary art. Psychologists since Freud have observed that selfhood is a matter of telling one's own story. Even the natural sciences rely on narrative models to make sense of such phenomena as evolution, reproduction, and the origin of the universe.

So storytelling is a way of thinking about things, and science fiction is a form of storytelling that invites us to challenge standard notions of nature and culture. SF's unique innovation within the code of narrative is to incorporate signs derived from science and technology in such a way as to evoke a sensation of strangeness—not mere novelty but a reordering of categories. Ideally, this reordering carries over from the fiction to the reader's own experience and

thus become the "sense of wonder" invoked in fan discussions of the best SF stories. The pull toward strangeness invites the SF writer to investigate aspects of society, self, perception, and the physical universe that are difficult or impossible to represent through conventional realism.

This invitation does not mean that all SF exploits the form's potential. Even though nothing has to be assumed in a science fictional world, in practice, contemporary cultural habits and attitudes usually get taken for granted. No writer can concentrate on every aspect of the imagined world at once, and the weirder one particular element is, the more likely other elements will be allowed to fall into familiar patterns. A 1950s story about methane-breathing aliens is all too likely to show them talking like 1950s engineers. As Joanna Russ has pointed out, visions of future society well into the 1960s have space-suited men coming home to the wife and kids in an orbiting suburbia (81).

Until the 1960s, gender was one of the elements most often transcribed unthinkingly into SF's hypothetical worlds. Even if an author was interested in revising the gender code, the conservatism of a primarily male audience—and the editors, publishers, and distributors who were trying to outguess that audience—kept gender exploration to a minimum. SF, especially in the United States, has been in the peculiar position of being both a popular entertainment and an arena for testing ideas. Its writers are expected to provide both escapist adventure and challenging thought experiments. For this reason, SF has never been easy to class either as literary art or as a popular genre along the lines of the women's romance novel or the Western. No single formula defines SF, although as Frank Cioffi has observed, many of its stories rely on formulaic plots (40–41).

SF's role as a commercial product has always tended to push it toward safe predictability and a reinforcement of existing social roles, but its own internal dynamics invite more daring variations in story, characters, setting, and social implications. Among writers who focus on technology and the physical sciences—writers of so-called "hard SF," the conservative side of the equation usually dominates. Moreover, SF texts aimed at the broadest possible audience—novels that break out of category to become best sellers, for instance, or nearly all SF movies—tend to reinforce the sexual status quo. However, when the intended audience consists of a smaller population of experienced and venturesome SF readers and the format is "soft SF," emphasizing human biology, sociology, or unusual forms of perception, then SF is more likely to challenge than to uphold gender norms. That is when the field begins to generate the "dangerous visions" celebrated in the title of Harlan Ellison's influential 1967 anthology.

Back in the 1930s and '40s, when the pulp magazine market severely restricted SF's ability even to imply sex, let alone offer subversive visions of male and female identities, a few writers found ways to investigate gender issues. Catherine L. Moore and Theodore Sturgeon, in particular, made use of the SF code to send deeply encrypted messages about sexual identity and

desire. Their work alerts us to the fact that most signs in the SF code—robots, aliens, psychic powers, death rays, and so on—can also function as gender markers. A story like Moore's "No Woman Born" (1944) is unusual for its era in that the signs of gender are reallocated. Its heroine, transferred into a mechanical body, unites three characteristics rarely seen in combination: femininity, power, and artifice. Those same attributes might have remained transparent if they had been distributed more conventionally. If, that is, the powerful mechanical body had been marked as masculine rather than feminine, it would have seemed to most readers to have no gender at all. Only Moore's reassignment of the categories makes them noticeable.

It is no longer so easy for gender markings to be invisible. Beginning in the 1950s, several factors, including a shift in market dominance from magazines to paperback books and the formation of a separate market for juvenile SF, led to a partial breakdown of sexual taboos. At the same time, the number of women writers (and probably readers, though this is harder to verify) began to increase. Like C. L. Moore before them, these writers, including Judith Merril, Katherine MacLean, Andre Norton, Margaret St. Clair, Miriam Allen de Ford, and Zenna Henderson, quietly challenged assumptions about which sex is rational, which aligned with nature, which capable of empathy, and which prepared for violence. Their stories, without necessarily being feminist or even including female characters, still tended to force awareness of gender roles and to foreground habits of projecting sexuality onto the nonhuman universe. They helped pave the way for a wave of powerfully feminist SF in the late 1960s and 1970s: Sonya Dorman's "When I Was Miss Dow" (1966), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Suzette Haden Elgin's "For the Sake of Grace" (1969), Suzy McKee Charnas's *Walk to the End of the World* (1974), Carol Emshwiller's "Abominable" (1980), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and James Tiptree, Jr.'s "The Women Men Don't See" (1973).

In the wake of these stories, it is virtually impossible for an SF writer to take gender for granted any more. If a writer wishes to portray unchanged sex roles in the future or in an alien society, that fact has to be explained somehow. It's the result of biological imperatives, for instance, or reactionary social pressures. The more conservative examples of hard SF in the 1990s are likely to offer such explanations while paradoxically depicting women as pilots, assassins, politicians, and so on. Evidently a single tough woman (shown in leather on the cover illustration) can be accommodated without threatening existing sexual arrangements.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is now a significant body of SF that makes the redefinition of gender a primary concern. An award for SF that explores and expands gender roles was instituted in 1991 and named for James Tiptree, Jr. The name is an appropriate sign for defiance of gender stereotyping, for James Tiptree, Jr., designates the authorial persona adopted by Alice Hastings Sheldon. Sheldon became Tiptree so convinc-

ingly that despite the feminist implications of many Tiptree stories, a number of critics were convinced that no woman could write in such an obviously "masculine" style.

The founders of the Tiptree Award and most of the winners to date have been women, although the official description by award founders Pat Murphy and Karen Joy Fowler does not specify the winner's sex. Not all fiction by women challenges gender assumptions, nor is all gender-bending necessarily feminist in its implications. However, those who are denied power or autonomy within a social system are more likely to be aware of its workings than are those who benefit from them. Hence, women have made up a majority of the pioneers in feminist and gender-investigating SF, from C. L. Moore and Katherine Burdekin in the 1930s to Tiptree winners Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith and a host of others in the 1990s.

Indeed, women writers and their ways of representing female roles within SF constitute a whole field of study in themselves. This book is indebted throughout to the work of feminist critics such as Joanna Russ, Beverly Friend, Marleen Barr, Robin Roberts, Sarah Lefanu, Elizabeth Cummins, and Jenny Wolmark. The field of gender studies grows out of the feminist insight that women and men play roles that are not inborn but culturally determined. Those roles are skewed so as to place authority in the hands of men, often by defining such powerful concepts as law, reason, tradition, creativity, and divinity as inherently masculine. The task of feminist women writers and critics has been to force these assumptions out of concealment, to show where they lurk in custom and language, and thereby to carve out a space for women to talk together, explore their experiences, and use those experiences to create new identities and patterns for social interaction.

Although gender criticism as a field grows out of feminist reading, and although the need for a more equitable treatment of women is always a part of the gender picture, the study of gender in literature is not restricted to the examination of women writers and the representation of women characters. Once women begin to demonstrate their independent existence, males too become gendered. Men are forced to reexamine themselves, and the comforting image of a stronger, more creative, more rational sex breaks down. What is left in its place is a record of some (mostly) masculine triumphs—the Sistine Chapel, American democracy, space flight, Magic Johnson on the basketball court—and also some really shameful behavior. Men, it turns out, belong to the sex that rapes and abuses, that rationalizes its own tendency to violence, that cannot clean up after itself, that whines about any loss of prerogatives, and that consistently disparages women and any of its own members that are perceived to be womanish.

This last trait may the most difficult to eradicate, for as ethnologists and psychologists have pointed out, the transition to manhood in most cultures has required a violent separation from a matrix (literally a womb) of femaleness. The pubescent boy becomes a man by rejecting the world of the mothers and

embarking on a journey to find his name and learn the secrets of the male warriors, a pattern that emerges everywhere from tribal rituals to classic American novels. But when women, too, can be adventurous, autonomous, and audacious, then the carefully constructed masculine self loses its foundation. Being a man becomes more complicated when it isn't enough not to be womanish.

The redefinition of masculinity has taken many forms, from imitations of women's consciousness raising to mock tribal gatherings. A considerable body of recent scholarship testifies to the need for new ways of thinking about maleness, now that it can no longer be mistaken for the universal condition of "mankind." In SF by men, one recent trend has been the dismantling of traditional father figures and their replacement by various groupings of mentors who may be male, female, or other.

Other? The traditional formulation of gender allows for male and female—or, more precisely, male and not-male—with no room for anything beyond this contrasting pair. Yet within the gender code, certain ways of expressing maleness or femaleness can serve to destabilize the binary pair. Such disrupters include cross-dressing, homosexuality, and surgical alteration of the body. Any of these variations can serve as a third gender option, thereby changing the positions of the other two. When there is a triangular relationship, it is more difficult to define one sex as the Self and the other as the Other, or one as complete and the other as lacking. Depending on one's commitment to the existing gender code, such third terms may be seen as dangerous deviance or overdue liberation. Marjorie Garber points out that the third term is not actually a *term* at all, in the sense that the binary pair is made up of opposing terms. Instead, it is "that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis" (11) by challenging the very structures of thought. Much as the third actor on a stage, added by Sophocles to classical tragedy, the third functions as the emissary of disorder, the messenger who brings the news that nothing is as it seems (Garber 12).

It is not only defenders of male authority who are made uncomfortable by the destabilizing implications of a "third sex." There are varieties of feminism founded on the idea of an uncrossable boundary between the sexes, and some of those who believe in an essential (and superior) womanhood, notes Bornstein, condemn androgyny and transsexualism with a positively Puritan rigor (75). Likewise, gay and lesbian activists who assert that one's sexuality is inescapably fixed upon one's own or the opposite sex may be uncomfortable with fictions about a sex that is neither opposite nor the same.

In fiction that purports to represent the real world, there are few ways to represent the category—or anti-category—of "thirdness." As mentioned above, the role of disruptive third can be taken by characters who possess epicene features; or who cross-dress; or who are, as in Balzac's frequently analyzed story of sexual misinterpretation, "Sarrasine," actually castrated males.

In each of these cases, however, it is possible to force the ambiguous character into a more conventional category; by the story's end, the author or reader (or both in collusion) discovers the "real" gender of the character and reinterprets events accordingly. Genuine hermaphroditism, as in the famous nineteenth century case of Herculine Barbin, does not seem to translate readily into realistic fiction. Perhaps this is because such cases come to us encrusted with medical/scientific language—chromosomes, genitalia, physical anomalies, in-utero influences, etc.—and are so firmly defined as rare exceptions that they naturally gravitate toward the form of literature devoted to science and the exceptional: science fiction.

For in SF, androgyny and other sexual alternatives need not be illusions to be dispelled or exceptions to be avoided but can instead represent plausible features of an extrapolated future or an alien world. SF writers are more than willing to disrupt the binary gender code with such concepts as a literal third sex, a society without sexual division, gender as a matter of individual choice, involuntary metamorphosis from one sex to another, gender as prosthesis, and all manner of unorthodox manifestations of sexual desire. Readers are asked to accept these features as literal truths about the imaginary universe of the fiction, but at the same time they are invited to map the new fictional (dis)order onto the world of experience.

In such deliberately disorienting stories as Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), about a world of androgynes; Tiptree's "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side" (1972), in which aliens of uncertain gender send out such powerful sexual signals that they coopt desire between humans; or Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), in which the pronouns "he" and "she" are assigned according to whether one desires or is desired, one is reminded that gender is both capricious and ubiquitous. It colors every perception, governs every exchange. The gender code is not something we apply to the world; it is part of our way of knowing the world. Historians and philosophers of science such as Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, and Evelyn Fox Keller have pointed out that science itself, despite its pose of impersonality, incorporates gender distinctions in its language, its social structure, and even its epistemology.

As an outgrowth of science, SF is well positioned to function as metascience, examining different ways of knowing. As an essentially realist mode—that is, one which constructs convincingly faked histories—it is capable of investigating history's shifting alignments of power. As a form of popular romance, it exploits, channels, and stimulates desires. Desire, power, and knowledge are thus not only expressions of gender, but also fundamental operations of the SF code. In order to explore the full range of interactions between the two codes, we need to look at recent feminist and gender-bending SF in the broader context of the genre's history, to see how concepts of the masculine, the feminine, and none-of-the-above have shaped the fiction of discovery, power, desire, selfhood, and alienness.

Gender is not merely a theme in SF; I hope to show that it is an integral part of the genre's intellectual and aesthetic structure. A focus on gender brings out certain transitional moments and counter-movements that have not figured prominently in most histories of the genre. What I originally imagined as a structural study of selected works has become, in effect, an alternative history of SF. Alternative histories have always been a popular subgenre within SF. It is fun to imagine what the world would be like if the Vikings had set up permanent settlements in North America or if Anne Boleyn had produced a male heir for Henry VIII. Besides being entertaining, such histories can open up new viewpoints on actual events: standard history may be written by the winners, but alternative history can be written by forgotten allies or losers or innocent bystanders.

Although I have kept my alternative history of the genre consistent with documentary evidence, I find myself contradicting widely accepted "facts" about its origins and development, particularly those that concern the centrality of certain writers and stories. A story may be a touchstone to some readers, reading with their particular interests, and largely irrelevant to others. Setting aside differences of taste, historical judgments still inevitably reflect the historian's perspective. Even in a scientific experiment, after all, what the observer sees is affected by where he, she, or it stands.

Literary criticism, like science, is performed by male or female individuals using gender-biased tools. I am not an indeterminately-sexed alien looking indifferently at these quaint efforts to come to terms with the gendered human condition. My reading of SF is grounded in my experience in a male body and a masculine social role. I respond powerfully and involuntarily to images and scenarios that address those experiences. I have only second-hand knowledge of what it is like to be a daughter, a mother, a woman in the workplace, or a woman in love, and in reading about such experiences I have to perform a complicated set of imaginative translations. In sum, the readings I offer in this book are neither objective nor universal.

Yet I read fiction not only as my individual situation determines, but also as I have been taught. From the very beginning of my formal training as a student of literature, the language I was taught to use and the perspectives embedded in that language, were masculine through and through. Outside of class, however, I was given another kind of education within stories by writers like Andre Norton, Madeleine L'Engle, and Eleanor Cameron. Later the tastes formed by reading their work led me to Patricia McKillip, Suzette Haden Elgin, Kate Wilhelm, Joan Vinge, Joanna Russ, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Eventually I discovered that some of these fiction writers—notably Cameron, Russ, and Le Guin—were also able critics working toward a feminist reading of fantasy and science fiction. From both the fiction and the criticism, I learned something of reading with an eye to gender assumptions, inequalities of power, and differences in metaphoric structures.

So I, as a reader, am a chimera, a science-fictional construct incorporating many identities and many voices. When I read and write about my reading, I catch myself echoing something of Russ's sardonic wit or Le Guin's inclusive humaneness. Their voices have become part of my reading self to such a degree that it is difficult to sort out and acknowledge the borrowings. Bakhtin's insight about the dialogic nature of fictional discourse also fits my experience of academic discourse. An essay such as this is a many-voiced dialogue in which direct quotation and scholarly documentation represent only the most obvious forms of indebtedness.

In writing about gender, I have attempted to let some of those other voices come through, especially those that speak from experiences and identities other than my own. This has meant not only reading women writers and critics but also discussing ideas with friends and trying out drafts of chapters on willing commentators. I got used to this way of operating when I took part in two projects, both of which involved working through issues of gender and SF. The first was the editing of an anthology, *The Norton Book of Science Fiction,* along with Ursula K. Le Guin and Karen Joy Fowler. The second was serving as a judge for the 1994 Tiptree Award, along with Pat Murphy, Susanna Sturgis, Lucy Sussex, and Ellen Kushner. In both cases, I had the privilege and pleasure of learning from my collaborators new ways of reading SF and new reasons to value particular kinds of fiction.

These experiences thus offer an answer to an accusation still occasionally leveled (by my students, for instance) against feminist criticism: that all it amounts to is condemning older literary works for not sharing the critic's views. It is, of course, true that the critic must read in historical context. One cannot expect most SF of the 1930s to do a very good job of representing women, let alone to give them the variety of roles they play in more recent stories. However, one can read 1930s fiction with an awareness of the mostly concealed interactions of gender and with, therefore, an even greater appreciation for the occasional stories that make artful use of those interactions.

I have tried, in my analysis, to incorporate something of the sense of discovery and pleasure arising from discussions with my fellow editors and judges. Decoding gender can be fun, whether one is tracing the hidden assumptions in a straightforward adventure story or sorting out the perspectives in a complex novel of cultural conflict. In the discussions that follow, I aim at finding ways to enjoy a wide variety of texts: short and long, new and old, covertly sexist and overtly feminist.

I sometimes treat whole groups of stories as if they constituted a single statement about gender, for in SF the individual story often serves primarily as a response to or an embellishment of an earlier idea. Indeed, in some ways all of SF constitutes a single encyclopedic repository of images, tropes, character types, and narrative moves. Damien Broderick and other critics have borrowed Philippe Hamon's term *mega-text* to describe the collective quality of the SF universe (Broderick 57). Some stories are more or less disposable in themselves