

An extract from 'Some Real Mothers': Vonda N McIntyre, feminism, and science fiction

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From the Handheld Press edition of Vonda N McIntyre's *The Exile Waiting*, 2019

The life and writing career of Vonda N McIntyre (1948-2019) encompassed the period when science fiction was being challenged by its encounter with feminism, and a group of women writers emerged who transformed the genre. McIntyre – with Joanna Russ, Octavia E Butler, Suzy McKee Charnas, 'James Tiptree, Jr' (one of the several pen-names of Alice Sheldon), and McIntyre's close lifelong friend, Ursula K Le Guin¹ – played a key part in these debates, conducted against a backdrop of entrenched sexism. McIntyre, in an interview given in 2010, recalled:

It was the 1970s and the modern feminist movement was just gaining steam. And there was a lot of controversy in science fiction about whether women should have anything to do with science fiction at all [...] It's changed enormously. It really has. You don't see people who should know better saying women shouldn't be writing SF, and women don't read SF, and there shouldn't be women characters in SF, which were all conversations that were going on in the early 1970s.²

McIntyre, along with Le Guin, Russ, Butler, Sheldon, and others, altered the contours of the genre. In McIntyre's case, her influence on sf went well beyond her fiction: she played a crucial part in the American sf community as essayist, editor, mentor, and publisher.

The Exile Waiting, McIntyre's first novel, has a sure-footedness and inventiveness that makes McIntyre's age on publication (she was 26) even more remarkable. Elements of the novel had been in progress from at least 1971, when the short story 'Cages' was published (it has been reprinted for the first time in this volume). An extract from *Exile* appeared in 1974 in the feminist sf zine *The Witch and the Chameleon (WatCh)*, under the working title *The Clouds Return*. The novel therefore crystallised during feminism's greatest impact upon American sf, emerging from a close-knit and rambunctious community. The setting and themes – a dystopian world that is nevertheless portrayed as non-sexist, a meticulous analysis of the deforming nature of power based upon manipulation and exploitation, and an insistence on acceptance of difference – reflect the debates in which McIntyre was deeply involved.

Born Vonda Neel McIntyre in Louisville, Kentucky, McIntyre was brought up on the east coast and in The Netherlands before her family settled in Seattle in the late 1960s. Graduating with a degree in biology from the University of Washington in 1970, she began postgraduate work in genetics, but ended her studies in 1971, by which time she was beginning to have some success as a fiction writer. (Her first short story, 'Breaking Point', 1970, was published under the name V N McIntyre. Initials were standard practice for women in sf at the time: Joanna Russ later persuaded McIntyre to use her first name.) Critical to this change of direction was McIntyre's attendance at the Clarion Workshop in 1970 (where she roomed with Octavia E Butler). Clarion, a six-week intensive writers' workshop, was (and continues to be) the course *par excellence* for aspiring sf writers. In 1971, McIntyre founded a west coast iteration of the workshop, Clarion West, which operated until 1973. (It was revived in 1984, with McIntyre's support.)

Between 1974 and 1980, McIntyre published two novels (*The Exile Waiting* and her most critically acclaimed novel, *Dreamsnake*), a collection of short fiction (*Fireflood and Other Stories*), and co-edited, with Susan Janice Anderson, an anthology of feminist science fiction, *Aurora: Beyond Equality*. During this period, she was shortlisted five times for the Hugo Award (winning once); five times for the Nebula Award (winning twice), and nine times for the Locus Award (winning once). This achievement would be notable by any standards; by this point McIntyre was still in her early thirties. She contributed extensively to the ongoing explosion in feminist sf criticism and correspondence. She was a regular columnist and reviewer in *WatCh*: notable contributions included a review of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover Landfall*, her feminist critique of which opened a debate between Bradley and Joanna Russ in the pages of *WatCh* (culminating in Russ's novel *We Who Are About To*). In one essay, titled 'About Two Million, Six Hundred and Seventy-Five Thousand, Two Hundred and Fifty Words', McIntyre reviewed a year's worth of sf short fiction magazines from a feminist perspective. She was a key player in the legendary 'Khatru Symposium', an in-depth letter conversation between some of the most significant writers of feminist sf of the 70s: Russ, Le Guin, McKee Charnas, Tiptree (still at this point assumed to be a man), Kate Wilhelm, and Samuel L Delany. Edited by Jeffrey D Smith, and published in 1975 across two issues of his zine *Khatru*, this collection of letters and short essays remains one of the key documents of American feminist sf. Through her writing, editing, and contributions to zines, conventions, and letters of comments, McIntyre's impact upon American science fiction at this time was huge. As Nisi Shawl, in a commemoration of McIntyre's life and work, wrote:

With the success of *Aurora* and her own blatantly pro-female-autonomy writings, she inspired and made possible hundreds of other classics of the field, such as Pamela Sargent's *Women of Wonder* series. She made a difference in what sort of stories were available in the '70s and '80s, and in who could reasonably expect to write and sell them. ³

From 1980 onwards, McIntyre's name became closely associated with the *Star Trek* franchise: she published novelisations of three of the films, and two other standalone novels. Other franchise work included a novelisation of the 1985 *Frankenstein*-inspired film *The Bride*, and an original novel set in the *Stars Wars* franchise, *The Crystal Star*. Between 1989 and 1994 she published a four-book space opera series under the banner title *Starfarers*. Her attempt to break into Hollywood produced a historical fantasy script set in the court of Louis XIV, *The Moon and the Stars*, which she wrote simultaneously as a novel (1997). ⁴ An early adopter of word processors and, later, the Web, she was pivotal in the creation (in 2008) and ongoing operation of the Book View Café, an author-owned publishing collective which aimed to give writers options beyond Amazon. (McIntyre's out-of-print novels and some uncollected short fiction are available from the site.) In 2010, she was honoured with the Science Fiction Writers of America 'Service Award', and she was a Guest of Honour at the 2015 Worldcon. She continued to write short fiction, and completed her final novel, *The Curve of the World*, shortly before her death in 2019.

McIntyre's later work attracted prizes (*The Moon and the Sun* notably beat George R R Martin's *A Game of Thrones* to win the 1997 Nebula Award), but critical responses became mixed. John Clute suggests that McIntyre's later work 'was generally less demanding than the novels and stories of her first professional decade, but continued to demonstrate her argued, numerate and humane understanding of how to engage the instruments of sf in feminist concerns'. ⁵ De Witt Douglas Kilgore, by contrast, in his essay on the *Starfarers*

quartet, praises her retooling of the conventions of ‘astrofuturism’ (ie narratives concerned with the exploration of space) and for ‘articulat[ing] for her readers an abiding hope that the exploration of space will foster a transnational renaissance that will free us from parochialism and imperialism’.⁶ Within the sf community, McIntyre’s writing became subject to the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s, notoriously in a 1989 article by Charles Platt, entitled ‘The Rape of Science Fiction’ in which McIntyre and Joan Vinge are singled out for ‘softening and sweetening science fiction, turning literary mind-food into conceptual cotton-candy.’⁷

By the mid-80s, cyberpunk was in the ascendance in sf, and the debates of the early 70s were being pushed aside. Samuel L Delany, reflecting on a history of American science fiction which traced an entirely male lineage from Alfred Bester, through Delany, to William Gibson, responded:

You’re omitting the Russ/Le Guin/McIntyre/[Joan] Vinge axis, without which there wouldn’t *be* any cyberpunk. Is it this macho uncertainty that keeps on trying to make us black out the explosion that lights the whole cyberpunk movement? [...] When you look at the criticism cyberpunk has generated, you notice among the male critics this endless, anxious search for fathers — that finally just indicates the general male discomfort with the whole notion of paternity. Which, in cyberpunk, is as it should be. Cyberpunk [...] doesn’t have a father. Or, rather, it has so many that enumerating them just doesn’t mean anything. What it’s got are mothers. A whole set of them — who, in literary terms, were so promiscuous that their cyberpunk offspring will simply never be able to settle down, sure of a certain daddy.⁸

In this brilliant skewering of the pretensions of cyberpunk, Delany not only re-inscribes feminism into the history of sf, but also illuminates the process by which women writers are invariably excised during the construction of canon. As our science fictional mothers leave us, this reprint of the first novel by Vonda N McIntyre – one of the brightest sparks behind Delany’s ‘explosion’ – is both timely and necessary.

Continued in the Handheld Press edition of Vonda N McIntyre’s *The Exile Waiting*, 2019

Notes

1: The title of *The Exile Waiting* comes from a poem by Le Guin. The book was partly written at the Le Guin family’s rural cabin, and is dedicated to Le Guin and her husband Charles. Their lifelong friendship is documented in Smith and Gomoll (eds) *Remembering Vonda* (2019).

2: Josh Wimmer, ‘Feminism, astronauts, and riding sidesaddle: Talking to *Dreamsnake*’s Vonda McIntyre’, *Gizmodo*, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/feminism-astronauts-and-riding-sidesaddle-talking-to-30859488>.

3: Nisi Shawl, ‘Vonda McIntyre remembered’, *The Seattle Times*, 9 April 2019, <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/books/author-nisi-shawl-remembers-her-friend-fellow-science-fiction-author-and-powerhouse-vonda-mcintyre/>.

4: Filmed as *The King’s Daughter*, starring Pierce Brosnan (Paramount Pictures, 2014; w. Ronald Bass, Barry Berman, Laura Harrington and James Schamus; d. Sean McNamara; as yet unreleased).

5: John Clute, 'Vonda N McIntyre', *The Encyclopedia of SF*, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/mcintyre_vonda_n.

6: De Witt Douglas Kilgore 'Changing Regimes: Vonda N. McIntyre's Parodic Futurism', *Science Fiction Studies* 27(2), (2000), 256-277, 272.

7: Cited in Justine Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 169.

8: Samuel L Delany, 'Some *Real* Mothers...: The *SF Eye* Interview, in Samuel L Delany, *Silent Interview: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 164-185, 177.

Further reading

Kathryn Allan (ed.) *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). A ground-breaking collection of essays which brings together literary scholarship and disability studies analyses to explore the representation of disability in science fiction.

Andrew Butler, *Solar Flares: Science Fiction in the 1970s* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012). A wide-ranging and informative study of Anglophone sf (across media) that cover the 'long 1970s' from the New Wave to cyberpunk. Both *The Exile Waiting* and *Dreamsnake* are discussed in the chapter on feminism.

Janus and *Aurora* archives (<http://sf3.org/history/janus-aurora-covers/>). *Janus*, and its successor, *Aurora*, were the two most prominent feminist sf zines throughout the 70s and 80s. All 26 issues are archived online. The first feminist sf zine, *The Witch and the Chameleon*, which ran for 6 issues between 1974 and 1976, is not archived online, but sample pages, excerpts, and overviews of some of the key discussions appear on the wiki site Fanlore (https://fanlore.org/wiki/The_Witch_and_the_Chameleon).

Justine Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002). A lively cultural history of the role played by women in the development of American science fiction from the 1920s-1990s.

Helen Merrick, *The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms* (Seattle WA: Aqueduct Press, 2009). A thorough social and cultural history of the intersection of science fiction and feminism, ranging from the US to the UK to Australia. Merrick gives a fine account of some of the charged debates in which McIntyre was involved, in zines and at conventions, as feminism exploded in the sf scene.

Julie Phillips, *James Tiptree Jr.: The Secret Life of Alice B Sheldon* (New York: Picador, 2007). Exemplary biography of Alice B Sheldon, who for a decade wrote under the pseudonym 'James Tiptree Jr', persuading the sf community that she was a man. Sheldon's correspondence with McIntyre, Russ, and Le Guin is documented. McIntyre, as co-editor of *Aurora*, accepted for first publication two of Sheldon's most acclaimed stories: 'Your Faces O My Sisters, Your Faces Filled of Light!' (as Raccoona Sheldon) and 'Houston, Houston, Do You Read?' (as James Tiptree, Jr).

Stephanie A Smith and Jeanne Gomoll (eds.), *Remembering Vonda* (print on demand: Union Street Press, 2019). This commemorative book, published shortly after her death, collects

memories and tributes from friends and colleagues, as well as interviews and obituaries, to show the extraordinary influence of McIntyre as mentor, teacher, supporter, friend, and host of many within the sf community for more than forty years.

Kate Wilhelm, *Storyteller: Writing Lessons and More from 27 Years of the Clarion Writers' Workshop* (Northampton MA: Small Beer Press, 2005). Part memoir, part writing manual, Kate Wilhelm's account of creating and running the Clarion Writers' Workshop contains an entertaining contribution by McIntyre on setting up the first incarnation of Clarion West.

List of works

Novels

- *The Exile Waiting* (Doubleday, 1975)
- *Dreamsnake* (Houghton Mifflin, 1978)
- *Star Trek: The Entropy Effect* (Pocket Books, 1981)
- *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (Pocket Books, 1982)
- *Superluminal* (Houghton Mifflin, 1983)
- *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (Pocket Books, 1984)
- *The Bride* (Dell, 1985)
- *Barbary* (Houghton Mifflin, 1986)
- *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (Pocket Books, 1986)
- *Enterprise: The First Adventure* (Pocket Books, 1986)
- The *Starfarers* quartet:
 - *Starfarers* (Ace Books, 1989)
 - *Transition* (Bantam Spectra, 1991)
 - *Metaphase* (Bantam Spectra, 1992)
 - *Nautilus* (Bantam Spectra, 1994)
- *Star Wars: The Crystal Star* (Bantam Spectra, 1994)
- *The Moon and the Sun* (Pocket Books, 1997)
- *The Curve of the World* (unpublished)

Short fiction

- *Fireflood and Other Stories* (Houghton Mifflin, 1979)

As editor:

- *Aurora: Beyond Equality* (Fawcett Gold Medal, 1976), with Susan Janice Anderson
- *Nebula Awards Showcase 2004* (Roc Books, 2004)

Non-fiction

McIntyre wrote extensively for small publications such as zines and convention booklets. Only a very small number of significant pieces which are easily available are listed here.

- 'Ursula K Le Guin: Mutinous Navigator' in *80! Memories and Reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin*, ed. Karen Joy Fowler and Debbie Notkin (Aqueduct Press, 2009).
- *Pitfalls of Writing Science Fiction & Fantasy: General Useful Information & Other Opinionated Comments* (Book View Café, 2012).

- 'Octavia Estelle Butler' in *Bloodchildren: Stories by the Octavia E Butler Scholars*, ed. Nisi Shawl (Book View Café, 2013).

Links to more detailed sources

- Vonda McIntyre's personal website: <http://www.vondanmcintyre.com/>.
- A comprehensive list of Vonda N McIntyre's publications, including details of multiple editions and a fuller list of non-fiction: <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?423>.
- Vonda N McIntyre's author page at Book View Café, including links to e-book versions of out of print novels, uncollected short stories, and selected non-fiction: <https://bookviewcafe.com/bookstore/bvc-author/vonda-n-mcintyre/>.
- *Remembering Vonda*, a collection of memories by friends and colleagues, assembled shortly after her death, is available as a print-on-demand volume, with proceeds going to the Clarion West Workshop: <http://www.lulu.com/shop/jeanne-gomoll/remembering-vonda/paperback/product-24164098.html>.