



Science Fiction

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us to an amazing array of individualistic, strange, and self-reliant folk escaping lives of quiet desperation. This is a complete landscape: from modern cities to angry grizzlies. For city dwellers this account has the ring of fiction, but McPhee's readable prose and his dedication to accuracy and detail can make anything immediate. Try asking students to go into a strange neighborhood and, like McPhee, recreate through concrete detail and subjective impression, exactly what goes on there, who does it, and why: an authentic assignment.

Kenneth Brower offers us two distinctly different odysseys: one to Mars and beyond on a huge ark propelled by exploding hydrogen bombs; the other, a silently elegant trip in a giant kayak from British Columbia, north to Alaska. If that sounds like either the 23rd or 17th century, thank Freeman and George Dyson, the eccentric, brilliant father and son whose dreams and exploits form the core of this provocative biography. Students will enjoy the close-up journey toward self-awareness of these two men of unusual vision, one looking to comets for intergalactic colonization; the other, to the purity of backwoods retreats. Whether as a model for comparison and contrast, or as a full portrait of two geniuses, *The Starship and the Canoe* is first rate contemporary prose.

Also strongly in the modern idiom is Michael Herr's harrowing *Dispatches* (Bantam, 1979), a gnawing, kaleidoscopic journey into the agony and fraud of Vietnam. Herr tells us firsthand what he sees and feels in terrifyingly authentic images and details. Khe Shan, Danang, DMZ: all the chilling horrific nightmares come rushing back with Herr's haunting, intense style. For students too young to remember, this brilliant piece of new journalism boldly captures the essence of the sixties.

Another historical journey filled with hatred and

absurdity, courage and stamina is Howell Raines' revealing oral history of the civil rights movement, *My Soul is Rested* (Bantam, 1979). With surprising eloquence and passion, dozens of famous and unknown voices of the movement tell their amazing stories of violence and compassion, cowardice and exultation. Students are free to come to their own judgments and conclusions listening to Rosa Parks, Julian Bond, Andy Young and Hosea Williams give behind-the-scenes accounts of what really went on in the Deep South. For an effective assignment in assembling and interpreting diverse, sometimes contradictory perceptions, have students interview others about music, drugs, jobs, etc.

From the tumultuous topics of war and race, pause quietly overlooking the Puget Sound with Anne Dillard's achingly beautiful *Holy the Firm* (Bantam, 1979), a reflection on the brutality and injustice of chance. This extended essay about a young girl who has her face burned off by the debris of an exploding plane is not filled with the fascinating naturalist's details of her praised *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, but with lean grace and clarity of prose, this mystical musing is equally riveting.

Non-fiction is real. As a stimulus and a model, it can help our composing assignments avoid academic insularity and be more in touch with contemporary writing. And a non-fiction text can be stretched over a whole semester's work, as the class pauses to consider theme, structure, syntax and character. Distinctive books like the five mentioned here can be treated as contemporary literature, as applied rhetoric, or as provocative catalysts for discussions. They should also remind us that essay writing can be a powerful, creative force, capable of ennobling, interpreting and re-creating a panoply of experiences.

—JOHN CLIFFORD

Science Fiction

In 1974 when Vonda N. McIntyre and Susan Janice Anderson co-edited their nonsexist science fiction anthology *Aurora: Beyond Equality* (Fawcett), they found that "many feminists . . . hadn't realized that SF, as an innovative literature, was an ideal place to explore the future of human potential" (p. 11). This cannot be said in 1979. The best recent paperbacks in the genre affirm the vigor, imagination, versatility and star-reaching influence of the Women's Movement. Clearly, many intelligent, articulate, visionary feminists (and their sympathizers) now understand how appropriate science fiction is for writers concerned about changing their societies.

Vonda McIntyre's own novel *Dreamsnake* (Dell), winner of the 1978 Nebula Award, proves that nonsexist science fiction can be as adventurous, wonder-filled and nonpropagandistic as the traditional macho variety. She also proves that it can be more artistic, profound and satisfying than it has been in the hands of many standard SF writers. Her ideas are conveyed

through intriguingly complex characters, actions, settings and symbols, never through harangues. Her protagonist, Snake, is a self-confident, self-questioning, self-fulfilling, self-transcending female healer who uses transformed snake venom to cure all but the most serious illnesses (the snake bite as remedy is a potent symbol). The central action, Snake's search for a new dreamsnake (the kind enabling the fatally ill to accept their fate) has the mythological resonance of *Heroic Quests*. The world Snake inhabits teaches her that caring is more important than controlling and that pain, risk and responsibility are necessary to growth so that no one (child, woman or other) should be "protected" into perpetual immaturity. Its character as a nonsexist world is reinforced by McIntyre's device of introducing a person as a leader, guard, etc., and only after several sentences identifying that person's sex by pronoun. This device, along with everything else in her work, challenges the idea of male dominance without denigrat-

ing men.

Similarly, Ursula LeGuin's novel *The Eye of the Heron* postulates a society in which any person may assume any role, the qualification being ability not sex. As in her Hugo- and Nebula-winning novel *The Dispossessed* (Avon), this society, the People of the Peace, is in conflict with a class-structured society under a few male "Bosses." This conflict enables LeGuin to explore various questions concerning sex, class and nonviolent protest. The movement of her heroine Luz from Boss's daughter to member of the People of the Peace to leader of a group seeking a new way of life emphasizes LeGuin's theme of the need for continuing evolution in individuals and societies. The anthology containing this novel, *Millennial Women* edited by Virginia Kidd (Dell), also includes some excellent shorter nonsexist works by post-1974 feminist SF writers Joan D. Vinge, Cynthia Felice, Diana L. Paxson, Elizabeth A. Lynn, Cherry Wilder and Marilyn Hacker.

Lest anyone forget what sexism means, Joanna Russ's *The Two of Them* (Berkley) shows how intolerable it is in even the mildest form. By making her heroine a Polish-Jewish-American teenager in the 1950s who joins a subtly paternalistic trans-temporal espionage organization that later sends her to a planet whose culture is modelled on the Arabian of *Thousand and One Nights*, Russ can dissect differing types and degrees of sexism, each soul-searing for women and soul-shriveling for men. Since none of these cultures employs physical violence against women (at least in this book), Russ implies that the greatest damages of sexism is always mental—in the constraint to conform, to live always for others and never for oneself, to bury even the urge toward creativity and originality, to accept the immurement of wish, want and whimsy. A brilliantly innovative stylist, Russ may nevertheless remain best known for

the icy precision of her vision. After the oblique opening in which it is deliberately difficult to distinguish the male from the female transtemporal agent, Russ's story becomes agonizingly clear, an exciting adventure, ever intriguing, but ultimately disturbing—as it should be.

Brief mentions must be made of Philip Jose Farmer's *The Dark Design* (Berkley) and Anne McCaffrey's *The White Dragon* (Ballantine). Both books are the third volumes of series that have been justly proclaimed among the finest in science fiction. (The previous two by Farmer are the Hugo-winning *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* and *The Fabulous Riverboat* and the two by McCaffrey are *Dragonflight*, a portion of which won a Hugo, and *Dragonquest*.) Both Farmer and McCaffrey present worlds in which males apparently hold the most important positions yet in which forceful, skilled, multi-faceted females not merely survive but frequently achieve their goals. Moreover, one of the central characters in *The Dark Design* is a late twentieth-century feminist and her portrayal is sympathetic, many-sided and well realized. A caution: *The Dark Design* cannot be understood without knowledge of the preceding novels or the concluding one, *The Magic Labyrinth*. *The White Dragon* can be understood by itself but benefits by being read in the proper order.

All of these books will be understood best by sophisticated young adult readers, though *Dreamsnake* and *The White Dragon* may possibly be enjoyed by advanced junior high students as well. Even though less sophisticated readers will probably overlook many of the subtleties in these works, they may respond to the snake bites that each of these authors provide to remedy the sickness of sexual stereotyping.

—STEVEN CARTER

Mystery

One very good reason to recommend mysteries is that they can be such great fun, capable of enticing students into a lifelong reading habit. Several have been made into popular films—which makes them all the more appealing to young readers.

One such is *Agatha* (Ballantine), Kathleen Tynan's fictionalized account of the unexplained disappearance of novelist Agatha Christie in 1926. Students might want to compare the novel with a non-fictional (though hardly scholarly) version of the same occurrence in Gwen Robyns' *The Mystery of Agatha Christie* (Penguin) and perhaps with one of Christie's own mysteries, such as her celebrated *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Pocket Books), which was published right before she disappeared. Her books are classics of the intellectual whodunit variety, in which a detective solves crimes through deductive reasoning, rarely soiling his or her hands in the process.

Sherlock Holmes is the prototype of the cerebral

sleuth, and he has been expropriated recently by several authors to play hero in their mysteries. Robert Weverka and John Hopkins have written *Murder By Decree* (Ballantine), an enticing novelization (adaptation from a movie script) in which Holmes solves the famous case of Jack the Ripper. He comes off less heroically, however, when he is seen through eyes other than those of the loyal Watson: In Michael Kurland's *The Infernal Device* (Signet), the hero is Holmes' archenemy, Professor Moriarty. The novel offers many delights, not least of which is the view of Holmes as an officious meddler.

At their best mysteries can offer students much more than escapist entertainment, introducing them, for example, to a variety of foreign cultures. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Penguin) by Joan Lindsay is set in turn-of-the-century Australia and concerns the strange disappearance of three students and a teach-