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Our Villains, Ourselves: On SF, Villainy, and... Margaret Atwood?

Greg Bechtel*

As a writer, scholar, reader, and fan of SF—that’s pronounced *ess-eff*, but more on that in a bit—I tend to dislike psychoanalytic approaches to the speculative genres. In particular, I sometimes find myself bristling at how psychoanalytic uses of the word “fantasy” can reduce the complex aesthetic and political mechanisms of the entire fantasy genre (a subset of *ess-eff*, in my usage) to mere projections of repressed anxieties (on the one hand) or expressions of romantic and “irrational” escapism (on the other).¹ What can I say? We folks who take SF seriously on (and in) its own terms can get a bit testy about that sort of thing. And yet, David Christopher’s examination of the Star Wars prequels—and their villains—does provoke me to think about just how much we love to hate our

favourite villains and what a closer examination of those love/hate relationships may reveal. Take me, for example. I take great pleasure in hating a long list of real-world villains and villainous enterprises: the Big Banks, climate-change deniers, Stephen Harper, Neo-conservatives, Neo-liberalism, Fox News, Sun Media, and the list goes on. I also love my favourite SF villains, and I am not entirely immune to projecting these SF villains onto the real world. Senator Palpatine as George W. Bush? Sure, why not. Though as a Canadian having lived through ten years of Conservative government, I’d be more prone to projecting him onto Stephen Harper. As Christopher points out, such projections can even be weirdly comforting, allowing me to imagine George Dubyah or Stephen Harper as far more intelligent than reality would seem to bear out, brilliant Dark Lords manipulating and

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magnifying the flaws of an “essentially” good system (that is, liberal democracy) to achieve their own desired ends. But I digress.

My long list of favourite SF villains includes everyone from Darth Vader (of course) to Wilson Fisk (*Daredevil*), from Severian (*The Book of the New Sun*) to Number One (*Battlestar Galactica*), from Magneto (*X-Men*) to Kilgrave (*Jessica Jones*), and from Mrs. Coulter (*His Dark Materials*) to... Margaret Atwood. Margaret Atwood? Oh yes, most definitely. In fact, Margaret Atwood may be my favourite SF villain of them all. I like my villains complex, conflicted, and clearly “evil” in their actions but never purely, entirely, or irredeemably so. I like the way that certain moments of (potential) identification—when I find myself *almost* agreeing with the villain’s perspective—can heighten the underlying shiver of evil. And Atwood’s clearly got the evil-actions part down pat. The way she used her power and ubiquity as a literary icon to march King-Kong-like² into the SF sandbox, gleefully kicking sand in the face of the ninety-eight-pound nerdlings there who had the audacity to claim her as one of their own while she insisted that her own work was “speculative fiction” about near-future *possible* worlds, which could *obviously* be framed in clear contradistinction to the *impossible* bug-eyed-monsters-zap-guns-and-spaceships tropes of escapist, anti-realistic “science fiction.”

But wait. Slow down. *Deep breath.* Some context.

I don’t mean to say that Margaret Atwood is a *science fictional* villain. However, she has at times—and, I would argue, with some justification—come off as a villain *of* (and within, and towards) the science fiction genre. A few years back, Margaret Atwood created a serious kerfuffle in SF circles. It may have started when *The Handmaid’s Tale* won the inaugural Arthur C. Clarke award for science fiction in 1987. Atwood, however, claimed that the novel wasn’t *science fiction* but *speculative fiction*, since she “define[d] science fiction as fiction in which things happen that are not possible today – that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or which contain various technologies that we have not yet developed” (“Writing” 102). Speculative fiction, by contrast, was about *possible* worlds rather than *impossible* ones. But things really heated up in 2003, when Atwood repeatedly insisted that her new novel, *Oryx and Crake*, was “a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper,” because “[i]t contain[ed] no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians,” and most certainly no “talking squids in outer space” (qtd. in Langford).

Suffice it to say, reactions from the SF community were less than positive. Many believed that Atwood was merely

protecting her brand as a “literary” writer, not wanting to scare off those of her readers who wouldn’t be caught dead reading something so lowbrow as SF. As Gary K. Wolfe put it (more charitably than many), “She’s not demeaning the SF market so much as protecting the Atwood market” (qtd. in Clute, “Croaked” 72). From an SF perspective, Atwood’s strategy seemed to play into the colloquially sharp distinction between “genre” and “literary” fiction, whereby genre fiction is lowbrow, fluffy, escapist entertainment, while literary fiction is more serious, realistic, and sophisticated. Such speculation seemed entirely plausible to many SF readers and critics, especially given SF’s long history of perceiving itself as a ghettoized and disrespected corner of the literary universe—as witnessed by Ursula K. Le Guin’s various essays lamenting this fact³ or, in a different vein, Samuel Delaney’s reimagining of SF’s role as a “paraliterary” form with the power to accomplish what more stereotypically “literary” forms could not. Others, like John Clute, argued that Atwood was entirely correct, in that *Oryx and Crake*’s clear ignorance of contemporary SF made it either very bad SF (e.g., outdated, clichéd, overdone, etc.) or not SF at all. Rather, as Clute puts it, “[b]alked by some seemingly unaddressable refusal to do her homework in the ways the 21st century is actually being made storyable by writers who have gone to school, Atwood is of course not writing

contemporary SF about the near future ... [W]hat Atwood is in fact writing is sci-fi about the near future as envisioned by Hollywood” (“Croaked” 74).⁴

Meanwhile and for decades, significant portions of the international SF community—including and especially the Canadian SF community—had been not only avoiding precisely such restrictive definitions as Atwood had single-handedly imposed upon “science fiction” but also using “speculative fiction” as an umbrella term to encompass a much broader range of speculative genres (including science fiction, fantasy, horror, magical realism, surrealism, the new weird, and many more).⁵ Furthermore, within the SF community, “science fiction” was generally understood to require some basis in plausible science (e.g. *Star Wars* would not qualify), with the sub-genre of “hard science fiction” having the highest threshold of scientific rigour. Granted, these definitions were (and are) continually debated within the SF community; however, whether out of ignorance or malice, Atwood managed not only to get these terms’ existing usages wrong but to virtually reverse them. Thus, Atwood’s unilateral redefinition of these terms seemed not only dismissive of SF as a whole but ignorant of how SF had been defining (and re-defining) itself in its creative and critical conversations for several decades.

The controversy came to a head with Le Guin’s 2009 review of *The Year*

of the Flood, in which she lamented that Atwood's disavowal of the term "science fiction" had forced her, out of respect for that disavowal, to "restrict [her]self to the vocabulary and expectations suitable to a realistic novel, even if forced by those limitations into a less favourable stance" ("The Year" n.p.). This in turn led to a public discussion between the two authors in 2010, with each author explaining (among other things) her own usage of the term "science fiction."⁶ By Atwood's later account, this seems to be the first time she discovered that the two of them espoused entirely differing definitions, such that "what [Le Guin] means by 'science fiction' is speculative fiction about things that really could happen, whereas things that really could not happen [Le Guin] classifies under 'fantasy'" ("If it is" n.p.). As seen in Atwood's judicious use of quotation marks here, she did not then—nor at any later time—back down from her own idiosyncratic definitions. However, since that time, she has also acknowledged that other people—such as Le Guin, who by all accounts is a long-time friend of hers—may have differing definitions from her own. And thus ended the long-standing feud between Margaret Atwood and the SF community. Sort of.

And yet, like John Clute,⁷ I find myself unable to entirely undo my annoyance with Atwood's sustained recalcitrance on this particular point. And each time a precocious English major in one of my

SF-centered first-year literature classes—it's almost always an English major who has read Atwood's *In Other Worlds*—cites Atwood's definition of "speculative fiction" as an established fact rather than a disputed term, a little part of me laughs silently (if a little bitterly) at the need to sidestep that term if I want to avoid what is (in the end) a rather silly debate. Certainly, I could give the critical context, and the history of each term, and so on.⁸ In some of my classes (those focussed specifically on histories of SF and SF criticism), I do. But most of the time, that's not the main thing I'm trying to teach, and it's not something I care about all *that* much. Certainly not enough to take on an imaginary proxy-debate with Margaret Atwood, whose star in the Canadian literary firmament—and therefore her ongoing power to dictate terms—certainly isn't going anywhere. But each time I make that accommodation, I give an ironic internal salute to the incorrigible villain that Atwood has become for me: my personal SF nemesis.

Of course, like any villain, my SF-inflected version of "Margaret Atwood" is largely imaginary. Indeed—and I realize I am here at risk of slipping into psychoanalysis—I suspect Atwood's villainy may stand in for certain recurring anxieties and/or fracture points within SF itself. Certainly, SF writers, critics, readers, and fans have been debating the question of precisely what science fiction *is* for decades—

but I don't think that's the main issue here. Rather, more recently, I've noticed a persistent and possibly growing annoyance with "mainstream" (i.e., non-SF) writers who seem to be more and more commonly poaching on SF territory. At the 2016 International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, this frustration surfaced in a panel discussion called "The Problem of Science Fiction Exceptionalism."⁹ Having arrived late to the panel, I don't know precisely how that title related to the intended topic. However, I do know that the conversation quite quickly came around to questions of genre-policing—whether it was in some ways necessary or useful and, if so, why.

Ted Chiang (a consistently award-winning writer of virtuoso-level SF)¹⁰ suggested that if SF is an ongoing conversation among its many readers, writers, critics, and editors, the question becomes not so much one of policing genre as one of gauging each participant's level of genuine engagement in that conversation (qtd. in Clarke). For example, it's easy to imagine old friends conversing at a party being annoyed by a random stranger shoehorning himself into the conversation (I imagine this stranger as a man, for some reason) and proceeding to mansplain a garbled version of their own conversation back to them. Likewise, SF readers and writers may be annoyed by "outsiders" who simply insert themselves into the SF conversation without having "done their homework" and educated them-

selves on the preceding history, conventions, central stories, and debates within the genre. Another panellist cited Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a good example of an "outsider" (i.e., a "literary" writer) who clearly knows what he's talking about when it comes to SF culture and contexts while just as clearly respecting those cultures and contexts.¹¹ And all of this makes sense to me, especially the part about respect for that existing SF conversation. Recall, for example, Clute's frustration with Atwood's "refusal to do her homework," and how Atwood's implied (or perceived) disrespect for "science fiction" was precisely what got all those SF noses out of joint in the first place.

However, both panellists and audience members were quick to point out that the need for those entering the SF conversation to sufficiently educate themselves before doing so raises several important questions: How much education in the genre is sufficient? Is there a magical number (or list) of titles that any aspiring SF writer needs to be familiar with? If there is such a list, what works should be on it? And crucially, who gets to make that decision?¹² Alyssa Wong (like Chiang, a prize-winning SF writer in her own right¹³ and by far the youngest person on the panel), acknowledged that she had not had as much time—in the simple, mathematical sense of age—to read the same number of canonical SF works as her co-panellists. Certain-

ly, she did her best to do her research and avoid reproducing tired SF tropes and story ideas, but as a writer she also needed to write *her own* stories, emerging from her own particular (sub)cultural background and influences, whether SF or otherwise. Interestingly, Wong—who has since become the first Filipina writer not only to win a Nebula Award but also to win that award with, in her own words, “a queer horror story” (“Hungry Daughters”)—was not the one to raise the next corollary question, which came from an audience member: What about those who have been historically kept out of, erased from, or underrepresented within the genre? Do “we” (the SF community) have any responsibility to welcome, accept, and actively invite diverse perspectives (and writers) into the SF conversation? Could there be a danger in over-policing SF genre borders with arbitrary entrance requirements?

It was probably just chance that the panel ran out of time before this last question could be discussed in more depth. Probably. But the spectre of another much fresher (and rawer) aspect of the ongoing SF conversation had already entered the room. News of the preceding year’s Hugo Award debacle had even spilled over into mainstream press,¹⁴ a sort of airing of SF’s dirty laundry. Depending who one asks, the 2015 Hugo Award controversy may be seen as resulting from an organized protest against the recent predominance of

overly liberal, “literary,” and social-justice-oriented writers (and writing) in the fan-based Hugo Awards.¹⁵ Or it could be seen as two allied groups of “rabid chauvinists... [and] raging white guys” manipulating flaws in the Hugo Award nomination process to subvert the system to their own ends (Schneiderman).

But any way you slice it, none would dispute the basic facts, which are that two groups, the “Sad Puppies” and “Rabid Puppies,” were unhappy with what they saw as the recent predominance of social-justice fiction at the Hugo Awards—written by so-called “Social Justice Warriors,” or SJWs for short¹⁶—and had mobilized a membership-drive to ensure that their preference of works would dominate the ballot in 2015. Of these, the Sad Puppies were more moderate, while the leader of the Rabid Puppies (Theodore Beale, a.k.a. Vox Day) had—and has—an unfortunate tendency to call himself the “Supreme Dark Lord of the Evil Legion of Evil.” He has also famously called award-winning SF author N. K. Jemisin an “ignorant half-savage” as part of a blog post where he argued that “Jemisin clearly does not understand that her dishonest call for ‘reconciliation’ and even more diversity within SF/F is tantamount to a call for its decline into irrelevance” (Day n.p.).¹⁷ These two groups’ purported mission—to paraphrase a certain right-leaning demagogue—was to Make Science Fiction Great Again. And for a brief moment,

they seemed to have achieved their goals, with Puppy-recommended works dominating the majority of the Hugo Awards finalist ballot. However, when the ballots were counted and the winners declared, all of the Puppy-backed works (except one) were defeated by “No Award.”¹⁸ And a collective sigh of relief was heard throughout (much of) the SF community.

So with all of this in mind, it seems easy to understand why a relatively good-natured panel discussion of “policing” the SF genre might be derailed when questions of diversity (or social justice) come up. Like a longstanding family dispute between ideologically irreconcilable positions, one might choose to avoid the topic in polite (or uncertain) company. Certainly, it’s important to those involved—and important to talk about—but one doesn’t exactly want to have that discussion in the company of “outsiders.” That shit’s just embarrassing for everyone. But okay, so what? Other than the embarrassment factor, why does that avoidance matter? Here, I find myself returning to the question of what our favourite villains may reveal about us. And I can’t help recalling Christopher’s suggestion that our villains may simultaneously expose and externalize aspects of ourselves that we might prefer not to acknowledge (or even consciously recognize), thus allowing us to imagine them as originating somewhere *other* than ourselves. If such were the case, what might my choice of

villains—or those of my fellow SF-reading-and-writing tribe—reveal about *us* that we might rather not acknowledge?

As you have no doubt gathered by now, SF and its various fans and fandoms—including and perhaps especially myself—have a long history of carrying Great Big Chips on their (by which I mean *our*) shoulders. There’s the lowbrow-highbrow Chip, which clearly plays into the SF community’s (and my) frustrations with Margaret Atwood’s disavowal of “science fiction.” But there’s also the whole nerdy-geeky-outcast Chip, the outsider-ness that many of us associate (whether positively or negatively) with SF and SF fandoms. We are the ones who often embrace the status of the outsider, the fringe, the weird, the scum at the bottom (or is it the top?) of the literary pond. We are the ones who have been known on occasion to refer to non-fans as *mundanes*. We are the ones who often define our preferred literature and media in direct contradistinction to what we commonly call “mainstream” writers, markets, and audiences. (Recall, for example, Clute’s disdain for mainstream Hollywood “sci-fi,” as opposed to the genre of science fiction proper.) Some of us, including our very own Chip (Delaney), have even been known to argue that we are not “literary” but “paraliterary” and that such a designation may not be so much a problem as a Damn Good Thing. We like to see ourselves as the few, the elect, the ones who

get it, while outsiders most certainly *don't*. “They” may think we are scum, but *we* know better. And this community of self-declared and self-selected outsiders can get defensive about (perhaps even possessive of) our status as beleaguered, besieged, or disrespected outcasts. This in turn might help to explain why we are prone to getting a bit defensive when an “outsider” infringes or poaches on “our” territory, so much so that we might even have a panel on that topic at an international conference.

The problem is, the Sad and Rabid Puppies remind us (the SF community) just how easily that sense of oneself as a marginalized, disrespected, yet nobly self-selected outsider can turn ugly. And looking too hard at those overlaps can be deeply uncomfortable. I think it should be clear by now that I don't (want to) empathize with the Sad and Rabid Puppies, groups whose politics, aesthetics, and arguments I would rather *not* associate with SF at all. These subsets of SF fandom identify so strongly with their own self-positioning as victims of “political correctness” in contemporary SF—as the “scum” rejected and disdained by a snooty liberal (and “literary”) SF elite—that they feel the need to stage a guerrilla revolt against the people they perceive as their oppressors, hoping to bring back the (largely imaginary) good old days when science fiction meant bug-eyed monsters, spaceships, and (predominantly cis-white-hetero) manly rock'em-sock'em

adventure stories. And yet, how different is this from me and my SF compatriots who feel we've been done wrong by Margaret Atwood, who we also feel has somehow oppressed us by disrespecting a genre (and ongoing genre conversation) that we are deeply invested in? We too find it easy to villainize Atwood's power as a self-consciously (read: snootily) “literary” icon, to see her as knocking us down a rung Just Because She Can. For that matter, how different is this from me getting grumpy about psychoanalytic readings of SF, not because of any carefully thought out logical objections but because I perceive them as misunderstanding (or distorting, or somehow disrespecting) the fantasy genre, my chosen area of study and expertise?

I suppose it's a good thing I'm not a fan of psychoanalytic approaches, or else I might feel like I had to answer those questions. I do think, though, that it's important to ask them. And to recognize that an *unexamined* sense of aggrieved self-righteousness can (sometimes) be a Very Dangerous Thing. So does that mean I must hereby forego or disavow my reading of Margaret Atwood as my personal favourite SF villain? Not a chance. Or at least, that's not what I'm going to do. But it does mean, perhaps, that I should take a closer look and question where that might be coming from. For example, I need to at least consider the possibility that Atwood's disavowal of “science fiction” and single-handed

redefinition of “speculative fiction” may bother me on a far more personal, less rational level. Perhaps it bothers me as a writer who, like Atwood, prefers to describe his own work as “speculative fiction” but who (unlike her) means something completely different than she does by that term.¹⁹ Perhaps it bothers me even more that she, as a “literary” writer, has actively disavowed precisely the sort of connection to SF that I deeply identify with and would prefer to embrace. Thanks to the whole Atwood/SF kerfuffle, “speculative fiction”—although this isn’t how Atwood defines it—is now often thought of as a more respectable, more literary cousin of “science fiction,” which means I can no longer comfortably use the term “speculative fiction” to describe my own work. Rather, as a writer whose work is (sometimes) read as more “literary” than “SF”—and to be clear, the idea that those categories are mutually exclusive has always struck me as ridiculous—I find myself being especially careful when using that term in American SF communities for fear of sounding like an anti-SF snob. Could it be that it offends me *personally* that Atwood so cavalierly rejects *precisely* the sort of recognition from the SF community that I would take as an honour?

Of course it could. And this is why I need to remind myself that the “Margaret Atwood” I call my favourite SF villain *is not a real person*. She—the villain—is nothing more than a collection of villainous

tendencies and actions (and yes, written statements) that I have shaped into a particular character, a handy foil that may help me to externalize (and thereby deal with) certain persistent cultural, sub-cultural, and personal conflicts. Not as a mere *symptom* or *neurosis*—which would of course be the true danger and consequence of denying that role qua role—but as a tool for starting to think through these conflicts. As for the *real* Margaret Atwood—the complex, fully realized, fully human individual? I have never met her in person, and I probably never will. I know very little about her, beyond her essays, books, awards, accolades, and the occasional Massey Lecture. And I know there is far more to her—and her thinking—than the tiny sliver I have chosen to focus on here. But the *villain*...

Ah, the villain. Her I know well. And I have polished her to a high gloss.

The villain is the one who once had a story published in *Tesseracts*²: *Canadian Science Fiction* and then later disavowed the term “science fiction” itself in sharp contradistinction to her own (idiosyncratic) definition of “speculative fiction.” The villain published an entire book based (at least partially) on her own definition (*In Other Worlds*), thereby establishing her terminology so solidly in the CanLit consciousness that I now find myself having to either avoid the term “speculative fiction” in my own teaching or engage in a lengthy discussion and careful critical contextualization

in order to do so. The villain, my imaginary nemesis, is also the author of an enthusiastic introduction to *Imaginarium 4: The Best Canadian Speculative Writing* (“Introduction: Don’t Be Alarmed”)—an anthology of Canadian SF encompassing “speculative short fiction and poetry (science fiction, fantasy, horror, magic realism, etc.)” (“Imaginarium 4”)—which also contains a reprint of one of my stories. And the villain is the one who wrote that entire introduction without ever once backing down from her own definition of “speculative fiction” (even while acknowledging that the editors use an entirely different one), placing that term in scare-quotes whenever she used it to refer to the contents of the anthology. As she puts it, “What you’re holding in your hand is ‘speculative,’ then, whatever may be meant by the term. Let’s call these stories and poems ‘wonder tales’” (“Introduction” 15). That clever, incorrigible, glorious villain is so thoroughly infuriating that she even managed to write her refusing-to-budge-on-her-definition-of-speculative-fiction introduction to an anthology of speculative fiction (and poetry) without disrespecting a single story in the book. In fact, she seems to like it quite a bit and expounds at some length upon the rewards of reading such a volume.

Oh that rogue, that devious silver-tongued trickster, that... that...
Margaret Atwood.

What can I say? Yes, Margaret Atwood is still and shall continue to be my

favourite SF villain for the foreseeable future. I can think of none better. My honoured—and almost entirely imaginary—adversary. Touché, Ms. Atwood. An honour indeed.

¹ In the latter case in particular, I find it hard to resist bringing up Tolkien’s discussion of the profound difference between the Flight of the Deserter and the Escape of the Prisoner. But don’t mind me. I can be a little hair-trigger defensive when it comes to my favourite genre(s). Though if you’re at all curious, you can find that discussion in Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy Stories.” It’s about two thirds of the way through.

² As Mark Anthony Jarman once (satirically) put it, in a surreal story about (among other things) Atwood’s ubiquity in the Canadian psyche, “I look out the window. Margaret Atwood is climbing the outside of the [CN] tower like King Kong, like Spiderwoman.” (See “Love is All Around Us.”)

³ See, for example, Le Guin’s “Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons?” (1974) and “Spike the Canon” (1989).

⁴ It should be noted that Clute here does not intend “sci-fi” as a synonym for “science fiction” but as a judgement of quality, since within (some parts of) the SF community, “sci-fi” has long been a pejorative term reserved specifically for poorly conceived and executed works that exhibit the flashiest external trappings of SF (e.g. lasers, rockets,

etc.) without the extrapolative rigour and substance that might more properly be identified as “science fiction.”

⁵ In a specifically Canadian context, Judith Merrill’s introduction to the first *Tesseractacts: Canadian Science Fiction* anthology (1984) notes “speculation” as an essential central element of the SF genre. *Tesseractacts²: Canadian Science Fiction* (Gottlieb and Barbour, 1987)—which, as it turns out, includes a story by Margaret Atwood—explicitly expands its definition of “science fiction” to include fantasy. *Tesseractacts³* (Dorsey and Truscott, 1990) abandons the science fiction subtitle entirely, asserting in its introduction that “The S in SF means speculative” (3). Finally, *Tesseractacts⁵: The Anthology of New Canadian Speculative Fiction* (Runté and Meynard, 1996), however, explicitly adds the term “speculative fiction” in the title, and this term has since been included in one way or another in the subtitle of all subsequent *Tesseractacts* volumes of Canadian SF.

⁶ The archived full podcast of this conversation can be found online at “Ursula Le Guin & Margaret Atwood” (<http://www.literary-arts.org/archive/ursula-le-guin-margaret-atwood>).

⁷ See “Margaret Atwood and the S and F Words” (2011).

⁸ For a concise summary of the term “speculative fiction” and how it has been used in various SF communities and contexts, for example, see its entry in *The*

Encyclopedia of Science Fiction (Nicholls and Langford).

⁹ The panellists were James Patrick Kelly, Ted Chiang, Jacob Weisman, John Kessel, Siobhan Carroll, and Alyssa Wong. However, my summaries of each panellist’s positions are reconstructed entirely from memory and should therefore be taken with a grain of salt.

¹⁰ See Taylor Clarke’s “The Perfectionist.”

¹¹ My apologies: I don’t recall who said this, only that it was said.

¹² The English lit scholar in me can’t help noticing how this panel conversation reproduces, from first principles, longstanding questions in that field, where the idea of the SF conversation overlaps with the broader concept of intertextuality, and the question of what constitutes a “proper” or “sufficient” education in SF is at heart a question of canon-building, with all the corollaries that entails. But of course, this is precisely how SF does what it does. It constructs a thought-experiment from a given set of first principles, then pursues that thought-experiment’s implications (whether logical, ethical, moral, or otherwise) to see where they may lead.

¹³ See “Spotlight on: Alyssa Wong, author.”

¹⁴ Coverage included articles in *The Guardian* (Walter), *Slate* (Waldman), *The Atlantic* (Hurley), and *New Republic* (Heer), among others.

¹⁵ See Brad Torgersen’s “Announcing SAD PUPPIES 3” and “SAD PUPPIES 3: The unraveling of an unreliable field”.

¹⁶ The pejorative use of “social justice warriors” was popularized as part of Gamergate—a similar movement emerging from the videogame community, and with strong ties to the Rabid Puppies—and I will leave it up to you to decide whether you want to read up on that (rather long) side-story at “What Is Gamergate, and Why? An Explainer for Non-Geeks” (Hathaway).

¹⁷ To be clear, in its original context, Day’s phrase “ignorant half-savage” is even more explicitly couched in racist discourse than it sounds on its own. Day’s full blog-post is easily Google-able, but I would highly recommend a quick reading of the following summary before deciding if you want to read the original post: “Vox Day says his totally-not-racist comments have been taken out of context. In context they’re even worse” (Futrelle).

¹⁸ See “‘No award’ sweeps the Hugo Awards following controversy” (Dean).

¹⁹ As is probably already apparent, when I use the term speculative fiction, I mean the umbrella-term usage most common in my own community of (Canadian) SF writers, the one encompassing all of the speculative genres, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, magical realism, the weird, the new weird, slipstream, and all of the hard-to-classify works that (like my own) fall into the cracks between the various genres and sub-genres of the fantastic.

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