

INTRODUCTION

My Love Affair with Queer Boys, Gay Lit, and Science Fiction

Richard Labonté

I CAN'T RECALL the first science fiction book I ever read. I know I was reading science fiction by the time I was seven or eight, when I was already bored by the Hardy Boys, the Bobbsey Twins, the Rover Boys, Nancy Drew, Brains Benton, and Tom Swift, whose spacey adventures were my favourite for reading more than once – though I had a thing for those Hardy Boys and their hearty comradeship, too. Perhaps my first time encountering the worlds of “if” was with one of the non-Tarzan books by Edgar Rice Burroughs, when I was eight or nine. Soon I was escaping from the world with *The Chessmen of Mars*, or exploring forgotten worlds in *At the Earth's Core*. I was living then in Paris, a military brat, borrowing English-language books from my father's enlisted male friends (my parents didn't read much beyond the daily newspaper). I recall seeing a large shelf of Burroughs books in our neighbour's living room. I also recall how I liked to wrestle with our neighbour, a single corporal, probably ten years older than me, though he seemed as old as my parents.

When I was ten, my father was transferred to Mont Apica, a now-shuttered Pine Tree Line radar station in the isolated middle of Parc des Laurentides in Quebec: the base was small, 800 or so residents, more than sixty kilometres (thirty-five miles) from the nearest small town, a self-contained village, really: I was able

to deliver the daily newspaper bussed in from Montreal to about eighty homes during my school lunch break. There were so few kids my age, boys and girls together, that grades seven, eight, and nine sat in the same classroom, maybe a dozen of us, and families were transferred when their children completed the ninth grade. Add in the kids from the Catholic school across the playground, and we managed to cobble together two softball teams in the summer, and three or four hockey teams in the winter. I was an athletic kid, but not really a team player; I was the catcher in softball, and the goalie in hockey, but ready to head home to a book when the game was over.

There was a small library, tucked away in the basement of the recreation hall, nestled between a two-lane bowling alley and a room where the Boy Scouts met once a week to tie knots. It's a cliché, I know: I learned to do more than tie knots with a few of the boys in my scout patrol. It was an early, untroubled queer sexual initiation. I also set pins in the bowling alley, sometimes handling both lanes myself, more often paired with a French-Canadian boy a year or two older than me, twelve or thirteen; we perched side-by-side while waiting for pins to fall, sweaty in the stuffy air, bumping shoulders and thighs and feeling up each other's biceps. Boy Scouts and bowling: young lust.

But the library was where I fell in love. With Robert Heinlein, Andre Norton, Jack Williamson, A. E. van Vogt, Murray Leinster, E.E. "Doc" Smith, Manly Wade Wellman, and Jack Vance, among many – a universe of imaginations conjuring a wealth of universes. Endless great escape. This was in 1960, and it was the first time, but not the last, that I lost myself in a room full of books. It wasn't a large room: there were perhaps 5,000 volumes, every one donated by families and bachelor officers and young, not-yet-married enlisted men. I remember an awful lot of *Reader's Digest* condensed editions. A lot of mysteries, but they weren't of interest to me then. And a lot of science fiction, enough to keep

me reading for a year, until one day a card fell out of a newer book, an invitation to join the Science Fiction Book Club, which I did, in 1961. I was twelve then, and for the next seventeen or so years, until I moved to Los Angeles in 1979 to help open the first branch of A Different Light Bookstore, I ordered every book, every month – except for the Edgar Rice Burroughs titles: his stories were for little kids....

So there I was, a practicing fag by the time I was twelve, and reading four or five science fiction books a week. My future was certainly going to be queer.

My future also became more homosexual, thanks to that same small library at the base. That's where, as I browsed the stacks, I discovered – again, I can't recall My First Literary Time; as I age, I regret I never kept an adolescent diary or an adult journal – a book by Gore Vidal, or Tennessee Williams, or Mary Renault. And just as I found my physical queer self in the raucous, musty bowling alley, back where the lights were dim, I found my literary queer self in that cramped, fusty library with its bright lights. I discovered a daisy chain of writers writing about people like me. Vidal led me to Williams, Williams led me to James Baldwin, Baldwin led me to Truman Capote, Capote led me to Paul Bowles, Bowles led me to William Burroughs, and Mary Renault taught me about both lesbians and lithe Spartan lads: a covert group of queer writers who blurbed each other's books. Ronald Firbank was in there, too, as were John Horne Burns, and Paul Goodman, and Fritz Peters, and Christopher Isherwood.

In all, there were probably fewer than twenty books, maybe thirty, that whispered *gay boy, read me* as I went through that library, shelf by shelf and book by book. And remember: military families and single men who rotated through Mont Apica every two or three years donated them all. Obviously, there were homos among them – John Rechy's *City of Night* popped out of a dusty box in 1963! – though it was certainly possible that a

well-read family's personal library included novels by Capote or Baldwin or Renault.

By the time my father was transferred, late in the same year that Rechy steamed up a young boy's glasses (my mother was awfully lenient about the books I brought home, and had in fact given the librarian a letter permitting me to read anything I wanted, though I hid *City of Night* from her prying eyes), I was a practicing homosexual, an avid SF fan (I discovered fanzines around the same time), and unusually well-read, for a young teenager, in the classical homosexual *oeuvre*. I've stayed that way for the forty years since. Well-read, that is, not a teenager. But reading SF keeps me young at heart.

A coda to my pubescent love affair with the genre: Three years after I segued from Arthur C. Clarke to John Rechy, when I was living on the St. Hubert military base outside of Montreal, delivering boxes of groceries and cases of beer on my bicycle to people in the married quarters, I met a man who was transferring out, and he asked if he could hire me to help him box up some old magazines. No hanky-panky ensued, alas: but that's when I acquired more than 1,000 old SF/fantasy pulps: *Amazing* and *Astounding* and *Astonishing*, *Future Fiction* and *Infinity* and *Other Worlds*, *Satellite* and *Startling* and *Spaceway*, *Weird Tales* and *Thrilling Wonder* and *Venture*. There were hundreds of the digests as well, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Galaxy* and those *Worlds of If*. I spent the next several years reading them. In 1980, the collection – expanded by the hundreds of magazines I had bought myself since 1965 – were destroyed when the barn in which they were stored after my move to Los Angeles burned down. To this day, the alluring scent of an old pulp magazine gives me a memory hard-on. And I still pick up an *Analog* or an *Asimov's* or an *F&SF* when I spot them on an unusually well-stocked newsstand....

Which brings me to 2006, and *The Future is Queer*, an anthology

synthesizing two of my favourite things: the vivid imaginations of SF writers with a literary bent, and the many permutations of queer worlds to come. There are several worlds imagined in this visionary collection: a future where clones forbidden sex nonetheless explore their emotional and physical needs; a future where too much tolerance is suffocating; a future where bisexual women and men are persecuted more for religious faith than sexual preference; a future where gender choice is magical and mythical; a future where virtual reality offers a lonely woman one more chance to revisit her dead lover; a future – eerily like an hallucinatory present – where a woman’s lover returns to haunt her; and – even more darkly – a future where every reference to gay life and art is being scrubbed from existence, and a future where gays in the military have earned the right to be fodder.

Lawrence Schimel and I received more than 100 submissions; I narrowed those down to a couple of dozen, he made the final selection, and the result is an astonishing collection of visionary – and entertaining – stories. This book was his concept; I’m delighted he asked me to help him shape it for you all.

Perth, Ontario, Canada

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INTRODUCTION

Looking in All Directions

Lawrence Schimel

THE FUTURE HAS long been the purview of science fiction – and that future has increasing implications for queer women and men. The gay marriage controversy, scientific “breakthroughs,” and well-organized anti-gay campaigns by the Religious Right seem to ensure that we are still decades away from achieving any kind of pansexual utopia some forty years after the advent of gay liberation.

Nonetheless, despite recent setbacks in some countries, – most prominently, the US – legal recognition of gay and lesbian marriages is taking place and, slowly but inexorably, moving forward. The further one looks to the future, the further technological advances – cloning, gene manipulation, etc. – will erode the biological imperative for heterosexuality as a means of procreation, making the social stigma against same-sex relations even less relevant. Additionally, the continued development of artificial intelligences, as well as improvements in surgery and technology that allow one to redefine and reassign one’s gender with greater ease and accuracy, explode our current notions of how we create and modify our identities.

The Future is Queer set out to address these issues, to create a visionary handbook or manual, with stories firmly rooted in

the queer present (and past) and extrapolating possible futures.

Science fiction as a literary genre has long provided a welcoming haven for writing and speculation about alternative sexuality. Feminist literature, as well, has a long tradition of utopian fiction. Since we believe the future is not binary, *The Future is Queer* draws from both these literary traditions.

Herein you'll find stories about the legal and social ramifications of cloning, the future of transgender spirituality, gays in the military, the splitting of identities taken to literal extremes, and even nostalgia for the repressive past – but always focused on the *human* angle of these socio-political or technological changes or innovations.

Nearly a decade ago, I co-edited *PoMoSexuals*, an anthology of personal essays that challenged essentialist notions about gender and identity. I like to think of *The Future is Queer* as a fictional sequel or companion to that collection. At first, Richard and I set out with a very strict notion of the type of stories we were looking for: what is generally described as near-future, social science fiction, depicting plausible, possible realities. We weren't looking for bug-eyed aliens or space operas, which belong as much to the genre of fantasy as they do to science fiction.

But just as the journey of writing doesn't always strictly follow the outline one has created before beginning a book, these strictures did get loosened in the end, to include what might be interpreted as future-based fantasy. So while there are no aliens or extra-terrestrial adventures, there are tales that draw on myth and archetype to extrapolate the queer fairy tales or fables of the future.

As with any anthology, it is impossible to please every reader – or even the editors! We argued for (and against) the inclusion of one story or another, and came to reasoned compromises which tried to satisfy as many concerns (personal, the number and citizenship of contributors, our budget, the publishing schedule and

other deadlines, the overall shape of the book, etc.) as possible. Our differences of opinion have worked to create what we believe is a stronger anthology, different from what would have resulted if either of us had worked on this project alone.

Submissions arrived from around the globe, through an open call as well as by special solicitation of specific writers whose work we admired; as a result, the book includes a mix of work by first- or second-timers and stories from well-established authors.

The contributors have a wide range of self-proclaimed sexual orientations: heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender – not that we asked, since it's none of our business. In any event, content was more important for this collection than issues of authorial identity, although we did look particularly for writing that was conscious of current gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identity politics, even if positing a world that moved beyond such concerns. We wanted stories that used the future to talk about issues from our queer past and present, looking in all directions at once.

The resulting mix includes provocative stories, authors, and themes you wouldn't otherwise come across. We hope this book will surprise you and challenge how you think about the world, in one way or another.

THANKS ARE DUE to a number of people who, during the course of our compiling this anthology, helped in one way or another. In particular, I'd like to acknowledge: first and foremost, the many authors who submitted work for this anthology, whether or not we were able to use their stories; Brian Lam and Robert Ballantyne, for having faith in Richard and me and believing in this project; Nalo Hopkinson and Jameson Currier for suggestions; Claude

Lalumière and Kyle Greenwood for extraordinary patience; and finally my co-editor, Richard Labonté, for many years of friendship.

Madrid, Spain

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