

Pop Queer-ies

EPISODE 3 – SPACE GAYS!: THE BLACK HOLES OF LGBT REPRESENTATION IN SCIENCE FICTION

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INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL MORGAN

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EPISODE OVERVIEW & PURPOSE

“A discussion about the lack of representation of queer identities in science fiction films and literature, and an exploration of why queer and especially transgender narratives aren't as present in utopian/dystopian speculative fiction.

In this episode, we'll be covering the history a brief history of Science Fiction as a genre, a timeline of queer milestones in this genre and how Science Fiction can be used as a tool for social commentary.”

1) Cheryl Morgan, thank you so much for being a part of this episode. Could you each tell us a bit about yourself and some of the amazing work you've done in the Science Fiction community ?

I was born in the UK but have also lived in Australia and California. I'm much older than I'm prepared to admit, but I did see David Bowie perform “Starman” live on Top of the Pops as a teenager. I believe that I was the first out trans person to win a Hugo Award (I have 4), though I am now not the only one. I'm a big supporter of fiction in translation, and of feminist SF. These days I run a small press publishing company and do a lot of interviews with authors on my show on a community radio station in Bristol.

2) How do you think the mainstream Science Fiction community has changed over the last ten years in regards to LGBT representation? How do you feel about the progress that has been made?

I can't really comment on the L,G&B as I'm pretty straight. As far as Trans is concerned, we have seen a major shift in my lifetime. Science fiction (much more than fantasy) has always been interested in medical gender transition. It is, after all, a very science-fictional concept. However, past narratives have almost always come from the cis gaze. They have either assumed that changing gender will become easy and fashionable in the future, or they have been the sort of anguished transition narratives that are popular in mainstream fiction, or they have been feminist denunciations of trans people. The trans people in the books have been objectified rather than being characters. In the past few years we have seen a significant increase in representation of actual trans people, with authors making an effort to get those representations right and giving trans people a role beyond the tragic victim. That sounds like progress to me.

3) What would you say are specific milestones in Science Fiction/Speculative Fiction genre that really highlighted the progress made for writers who are women, queer or otherwise traditionally marginalized?

Identifying trans milestones in the 20th Century is difficult because I am not sure who is happy to be

out, but I can mention Rachel Pollack's run on the *Doom Patrol* comic, and her introduction of Kate Godwin (a.k.a. Coagula), a trans woman superhero.

One other 20th Century milestone is Elizabeth Hand's Tiptree-winning novel, *Waking the Moon*. By modern standards it doesn't have the most believable representation of a trans person. However, the book is very feminist, and it is unusual in that it uses the trans character to make feminist points about gender, rather than using feminism to attack trans people which had been very common in feminist SF&F prior to that time.

Moving forward I'd like to give some credit here to Ian McDonald. He wrote some pretty awful things about trans people in *Sacrifice of Fools* and was strongly criticised for it. Rather than get all defensive and sulky, he determined to learn and do better. *River of Gods* and *Brasyl*, both of which were Hugo finalists, were some of the first recent books to do good job of trans representation. I think Ian showed the rest of the community what could be done, and that will have given others a lot of confidence to follow suit.

Ian's latest series, beginning with *Luna: New Moon*, has a very gender-diverse cast. However, in that area he is following in the footsteps of Pat Cadigan whose novelette, "The Girl Thing Who Went Out For Sushi", won a Hugo in 2013.

Charlie Jane Anders winning a Hugo in a fiction category with "Six Months, Three Days" is of course highly significant, as is Caitlín R. Kiernan getting a heap of nominations (and winning the Stoker and Tiptree) for *The Drowning Girl*. Kiernan's book has a trans character in a major supporting role.

In media the Wachowski sisters' *Sense8* is hugely significant, having a trans woman playing a trans character as one of the series leads. However, the biggest news story regarding trans characters was probably Alysia Yeoh, Barbara Gordon's flatmate, coming out as trans during Gail Simone's run on *Batgirl*.

4) Despite mainstream science fiction films and literature starting to adopt from gay and lesbian characters, we still have yet to see positive representations of trans women in larger, more commercial productions. What are the sorts of representations that you would like to see in the future, and what sort of tropes are you hoping will be avoided?

Movies are a hard nut to crack, but Lana and Lily Wachowski are already doing good things for trans people with the *Sense8* TV series. I'd love to see them given the same freedom for a cinema production. The starting point is that trans people should be in the story as ordinary people, not because they are trans. If issues of trans life are explored, they should be done in a non-exploitative way.

The thing I most want to avoid is more transition stories. Transition makes up a very small, unrepresentative (and painful) part of trans people's lives, but if you read mainstream media you would think it was the only interesting thing about us. It would be nice if the trans character didn't die

at the end of the film too.

5) Cheryl, you're clearly an amazing woman who has accomplished so much and wears so many different hats. As both a writer, critic and the owner of "Wizard's Tower Press", what would you say are one of the bigger obstacles in getting queer narratives, especially transgender narratives, recognized and/or published within the Science Fiction community? Would you care to speculate as to why queer, and more notably, transgender people don't play a larger role as characters in specifically utopian/dystopian fiction?

The biggest obstacle, and I don't think this is by any means specific to the science fiction community, is the cis gaze. Publishers faced with a story about a trans character do not think, "is this an accurate and respectful portrayal of a trans person?" Often they would have no idea how to answer that question. They think, "Is this the sort of story about a trans person that I, and people like me, would like to read?" We know from the endless stream of transition stories in the mainstream media that cis people are fascinated by trans people, but they are fascinated with us as a freak show, not as human beings. Until trans people become a fully accepted part of society, no more remarkable than someone with red hair or a decent singing voice, this problem will continue.

There have been a number of books looking at same-sex utopias and dystopias, but these clearly have a political agenda. It is hard to see why anyone would propose a society based on trans people. Of course in *The Female Man* Joanna Russ does describe an "all-male" dystopia that uses trans women in place of those assigned female at birth, but Russ has long since apologised for that.

There are some books that do fit the bill. Samuel Delaney's *Triton* is subtitled, *An Ambiguous Heterotopia*, and has one major trans character and another who undergoes gender transition despite being very obviously not trans. Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* is set in a post-revolutionary America and contrasts different approaches to trans identities. Sue Isle's *Nightsiders* is the story of a young trans man in an Australia suffering from extreme climate change, and Kim Westwood's *The Courier's New Bicycle* stars a non-binary person living in a Australia governed by a Christian Fundamentalist government.

6) You've very well connected to the more indie scene in the SF community, are there any works that you'd like to recognize as being either especially progressive or just really well written in terms of queer representation?

Well the two Australian books I have just mentioned both come from Australian publishers. *Nightsiders* is from Twelfth Planet, which is a very small, woman-run business that achieves amazing things.

Lethe Press, which specialises in LGBT-themed books, produced *Beyond Binary*, which is an anthology of trans-themed SF&F. It tries very hard to cover as much of the trans spectrum as possible.

Topside Press, which specializes in books by trans writers, has a science fiction anthology in production. I understand that they got over 250 submissions, which is astonishing. I'm looking forward to seeing that.

Holdfast Magazine is a small UK magazine that has been very supportive of me. I'm sure they will be open to other trans writers as well.

At Wizard's Tower we haven't yet done anything specifically trans-themed, though I very much want to do so at some point. However, I have re-issued *Damage Time* by the late Colin Harvey. Colin was a good friend, so I'd have done this for him anyway, but *Damage Time* features an intersex character as the primary love interest for the book's hero (a Muslim detective in New York). I wasn't involved in the initial editing of the book and there are a few things I might have tweaked if I had, but Colin's heart was in the right place.

7) Lastly, do you have any other thoughts that you'd like to share?

The most important point I want to make is that getting good trans representation is a process. Not every book will get it right, not every author will become an expert overnight. Also, of course, every trans person is different. A book that seems to have good trans representation to one person might seem horribly transphobic to another. We mustn't discourage authors from trying because of this. It is very easy to get angry over poor representation, but there are a lot more cis people than trans people. Of course we'd do better ourselves, and I want to see us given the chance, but we'll change society much more quickly if cis people write good trans characters too. I want to encourage them and help them to do that.

Cheryl Morgan, thank you again for sharing your thoughts with us. We really appreciate this, and if there any work that you'd like us to plug, please go ahead and let us know!

I have nothing specific I can talk about right now, but watch this space as Wizard's Tower may have an announcement or two later in the year.