

**Science Fiction Book Club**  
**Interview with Robin Roberts (May 2022)**

*Robin Roberts is professor of English and gender studies at the University of Arkansas. She is author of several books on gender and popular culture, including *Subversive Spirits: The Female Ghost in British and American Popular Culture*, *Anne McCaffrey: A Life with Dragons*, and *Ladies First: Women in Music Videos* and coauthor (with Leslie A. Wade and Frank de Caro) of *Downtown Mardi Gras: New Carnival Practices in Post-Katrina New Orleans*, all published by University Press of Mississippi. Her books *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction*, and *Sexual Generations: Star Trek: The Next Generation and Gender*, are published by University of Illinois Press, and she also is the author of *Anne McCaffrey: A Critical Companion*, published by Greenwood Press.*

**Kev Smith: Given that Anne was the first female author to win the Nebula and Hugo awards. What did Anne see as her greatest achievement?**

Anne began writing before science fiction was truly accepted as work of literary merit. While she was very proud of being a ground-breaking woman writer, she was also invested in raising science fiction's reputation. While she won numerous honors and awards, it was the prestigious American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Literary Achievement that meant the most to her. The words "literary achievement" signaled to her—and to the world—that science fiction was literature. She also had the utmost respect for librarians and libraries, and had even considered pursuing a library degree at one point. Being named a Grand Master by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, an honor only given to twenty-two other writers when she received it 2005, was also a high point. Of course, winning the Nebula and the Hugo very early on in her career helped inspire and sustain her through times of adversity.

**John Grayshaw: What makes McCaffrey interesting from a critical perspective? What first drew you to her work?**

As a young girl I found science fiction inspiring, and Anne's *Dragonflight* and *The Ship Who Sang* both were books I read and re-read. I continued to read science fiction while I studied canonical literature in college and graduate school. As a graduate assistant, I was allowed to choose my own texts for writing classes I taught, and I taught *The Ship Who Sang* often. My students loved her writing also! While I faced some obstacles in writing my dissertation on feminist science fiction, I was able to include McCaffrey in that work and in my first book, *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction*. Kathleen Gregory Klein, a feminist critic of popular fiction, was appointed editor of a popular culture series for Greenwood Press. Concerned that there weren't many women writers being included, Klein (who knew of my book that included McCaffrey), contacted me to see if I would undertake to write a "Critical Companion" for McCaffrey. Although I had another book under contract, I immediately said yes. I thought I had kept up rather well with McCaffrey's work, and thought I could write the book quickly. To my surprise, McCaffrey's productivity—and honors—had continued piling up! So, I had the very pleasant task of starting from the beginning and reading all the books she had written in the 1980s up to the mid-1990s. McCaffrey's originality and her ability to generate emotional commitment in her characters is compelling. While she doesn't shy away from tragedy, there is a fundamental optimism about her works that is uplifting. And her commitment to science is solid—an attitude in far too short a supply these

days. Her success in science fiction, up to then a man's genre, and her resistance to women's subordination is also one of the strengths of her work.

**Eva Sable/Kev Smith: Did Anne have a favorite among her works? And do you?**

A good but difficult question! I have at least a dozen favorite books by her. When I am asked for recommendations, I try to think what the questioner might like best—The Harper Hall Trilogy reaches young people very effectively—as well as adults. *Dragonflight* encapsulates much of what is compelling about the Pern series. *The Ship Who Sang* and *Crystal Singer* offer insights into struggles of artists and performers. There are certainly elements of Anne's struggles as a young woman in *The Ship Who Sang*. Now that I am older, I appreciate some of her books with mature protagonists, the Rowan and Power Be books.

**John Grayshaw: What are some of McCaffrey's works that you feel should be better known than they are?**

Her non-science fiction books, her romances, are well written and deserve more critical attention.

**John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writers McCaffrey grew up reading? And who are some writers that were McCaffrey's contemporaries that she enjoyed/admired?**

Anne was a great reader from her early childhood. She enjoyed science fiction movies including *Flash Gordon* and listened to radio serials such as *The Lone Ranger*. Other books that were well known during her youth that made an impression on her include Caroline Dale Snedecker's *The Forgotten Daughter*, *The White Isle*, and *The Spartan*. She was fond of Rudyard Kipling's work, and adapted one of his short stories for a play at a summer camp. Zane Grey was another writer whose work she read extensively. One novel she cited often as an influence was Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia*, a book Ursula K. Le Guin also mentions as an influence. While these novels are products of their time, Anne saw also their resistance to authoritarianism and intolerance. Even Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* contains a Mormon woman who declares she will die before bending her knees in subordination to a sexist and xenophobic Mormon hierarchy.

Anne was very supportive of her writing peers. She was always willing to write a supportive blurb for a new writer whose work she admired, including Elizabeth Moon, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, Sharon Shinn, Naomi Novik, Robin Hobb, David Gerrold, among many others. She was friends with Terry Pratchett, who included a character based on her in his books. Before she moved to Ireland, she had a close relationship with Isaac Asimov.

**John Grayshaw: What kind of research did McCaffrey do for her books?**

She was adamant that every aspect of her worlds would be scientifically plausible and justifiable. She reached out to scientists of all types to get correct information. She could get quite perturbed when fans created dragons that were of colors that would not have worked with the biology on which the dragons were based, to cite just one example.

**Von Rothenberger: Did Anne consider her writing to be science fiction or fantasy - or both?**

She rejected outright that any of her work was fantasy or fairy tale based. There is always a rational, logical, scientific explanation for the worlds, characters, and powers that appear in her books.

**John Grayshaw: I know that McCaffrey always said she wrote Science Fiction not Fantasy, but don't her works have a lot of Fantasy element too?**

Yes, her works do have fantasy elements—such as dragons. But her dragons are genetically created beings. And I think she agreed with the famous statement of Arthur C. Clarke, Clarke's Third Law:

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

**John Grayshaw: How did McCaffrey become interested in dragons? What is it about the Pern Universe that made McCaffrey want to write so many stories set in it?**

While Anne also said that dragons were not based on horses, she loved horses, and talked about one horse, Ed, as her strength and refuge. I see Anne's revision of dragons as part of a zeitgeist in the 1960s, when Asimov, for example, was re-envisioning robots as being humanity's friend rather than foe. It was a time of optimism and belief in positive change. Humans need partners to help them advance (and survive) and dragons were a vehicle for partnering with beings other than human—a way to be rewarded for being not just tolerant but also empathic with other forms of life. Dragons also offer women a source of power, and are rather clearly phallic (like rocketships). I think Anne would have liked to live in Pern, and it was also the most popular of her series. Anne often said that Ireland, where she moved in the 1970s, looked like Pern—stony mountains, etc...

**John Grayshaw: How has Todd McCaffrey continued her work? How are his stories similar to his mother's and how do they differ?**

Todd has done a wonderful job of continuing Anne's work, though naturally he brings his own perspective and writing skills. He emphasizes action rather more than Anne did, but he was brought up knowing the world and discussing writing with his mother. Her daughter Gigi has also published stories and a book set in Pern. They are the only two people Anne authorized to write Pern books, though she was very generous even when living in sharing her other creations.

**John Grayshaw: McCaffrey has said in interviews that "The Ship Who Sang" was her favorite of her stories. Can you tell us why this is? And tell us more about this work?**

Anne put her heart into this early work, writing it after her father's death. The collection of stories demonstrate the power of art to transform and humanize great loss, and of art also to allow humans to connect with alien species, the ability of science to make a "disabled" person more powerful than any human being. McCaffrey helps you identify with Helva, searching for a way to be human and to be accepted, even as her body is no longer completely human. It is the ultimate outsider's story. Singing was very important to Anne, so though she had to give up singing professionally, she found a way to include music in many of her works. This story contains her key messages as a writer about persevering, about accepting difference, about embracing art.

**John Grayshaw: What made McCaffrey want to return to the Ship Who Sang series in the 90's with co-authors? Do these stories live up to the original?**

It is hard for any sequel to live up to a book as powerful as *The Ship Who Sang*. Nevertheless, I think the subsequent volumes do a good job of capturing the concept of brain ships (and brain city). Anne was motivated to help mid-list authors by allowing them to write in her worlds. It was very generous of her.

**John Grayshaw: I heard that McCaffrey was a singer in her youth and that the Crystal Singer was partly autobiographical, what else can you tell us about this wonderful series?**

The series' concept—that an expert singer's voice could be used to mine valuable crystal, and that a side effect of the process would be virtual immortality and infertility is an original and compelling concept. Like Killashandra, Anne also developed a burr in her voice that meant dreams of singing professionally had to be abandoned. Anne channeled that experience into a wonderful “what if” scenario that allows the Crystal Singer a new and significant future.

**John Grayshaw: Who are some of the science fiction writers she had correspondence/friendships with?**

As an early officer—Secretary, of course, because she was female! Of the Science Fiction Writers of America, Anne knew everyone. As mentioned above, Isaac Asimov, Terry Pratchett, later Neil Gaiman was a fan. She knew Marion Zimmer Bradley.

**John Grayshaw: Are there any examples of McCaffrey corresponding/meeting with fans? Did she enjoy going to conventions?**

Anne was an enthusiastic convention-goer—extremely generous with her time and her funds. She often bought fans meals, took care of medical expenses for hardship cases. She was grateful to her fans. However, convention-going was exhausting, and when I shadowed her at DragonCon one year, she showed me a crystal she wore on a chain under her shirt, to protect her energy. I sat with her for four hours, while hundreds of fans came up to her, hugged her, gave her hand-made gifts (often with dragon motifs). So many of them told her she had made a difference in their lives, even saved their lives. Two of her fans helped her with continuity issues—their commitment to her work was invaluable—Marilyn and Harry Alm.

**John Grayshaw: What are some of the most interesting things you've found in your research of McCaffrey?**

Since I am also a fan of Isaac Asimov and had met him, their relationship was confirming in a way.

The ways in which Anne's life and home/estate in Ireland became like a Hold, and she a Master Harper, was fascinating.

The impact of her agent and editor, Virginia Kidd, was a reminder that all writers need editing and support.

The obstacles she faced and overcame as a woman writer with three children and an unsupportive husband were eye-opening.

The Irish heritage that shaped her parents' and grandparents' world view and thus her also was illuminating. I learned a lot about discrimination against the Irish in the U.S.

**John Grayshaw: What was it like to interview McCaffrey?**

She was an amazingly warm, kind, and generous person. My mother insisted we personally deliver *Anne McCaffrey: A Critical Companion* to Anne in Ireland. Anne allowed us to visit and charmed my mother. Until her death, Anne always asked about my mother and sent her regards. After we left Anne's home,

Dragonhold-Underhill to return to our hotel in Dublin, we found an enormous bouquet of flowers in our room with a note that said, "I do believe you've got it." Since I knew McCaffrey had not been happy with previous critical analyses of her work, I was very delighted with that response. Years after, when I used her archives and spent weeks interviewing her in her home, her entourage was extremely protective and made it clear I was not to overtax her. One of her employees actually waved sage around to "clear the atmosphere." But Anne was very open and honest and realized a biography would be a record of her life and work. She opened her files to me and made no restrictions on what I could write about her. When her mobility became limited, she would scoot around at high speed on her scooter. She had a delightful sense of humor and a lovely laugh. When I heard of her death, I was devastated—as were legions of her friends, fans, and readers.

**Paul Flanigan/John Grayshaw: Is there any plans to develop any of the Pern novels into TV or film? Or any of McCaffrey's other works?**

Her Pern series has been sold multiple times, but as is often the case, the complications and in earlier years, issues with special effects, have kept anything from making it to the screen. The Pern series is, I believe, still under contract. A writer had been attached, but I have heard nothing since. I hope that some day soon, her work will be realized in tv or film.

**Chris Hunneysett: Did Anne have any thoughts on possible similarities between her Impression of dragons and the film Avatar?**

What a wonderful question! I don't know of any overt link, but Anne's vision of dragons has a been very influential. I will look into it, especially as there is a new *Avatar* coming out soon.

**Jan van den Berg: I would very much like to know why Anne started series with strong women who later on become second to male partners? For example, Pern, especially Menolly. Also Tower & Hive (The Rowan and Jeff, and Damia and Afra) and the original Petaybee trilogy. To a lesser amount the Crystal trilogy.**

Another compelling question—Anne came of age in the 1950s. In that time period, compulsory heterosexuality was unquestioned, even worsened by the post-World War II "get women back to the home" push. A contemporary of Anne's, Betty Frieden, wrote *The Female Eunuch* based on her life as a young college-educated white woman very like Anne. Anne did not completely reject that narrative—the romance plot is, after all, quite dominant in western literature. But she always gave her heroines powers and external motivations besides romance. I recommend her novel *Restoree* as a radical rejection of traditional heterosexual mores. Like Victorian woman writers, who ended their novels with a marriage, Anne's endings are often at odds with female characters' lives and actions in the rest of the book.

**John Grayshaw: Are there any unpublished McCaffrey works in a drawer or archive or is everything published?**

Not that I know of—but I believe she shared ideas for plots with Todd up until she died.

**John Grayshaw: Did McCaffrey have any particular writing habits or routines she stuck with?**

She was a regular and dedicated writer, putting in long hours. She shared her manuscripts always with her editors and incorporated their feedback. She co-wrote usually through computer disks, but Elizabeth

Ann Scarborough stayed with Anne for several months, where each wrote in separate rooms and came together at the end of the day to share material.

**John Grayshaw: What were some of McCaffrey's hobbies other than writing?**

She loved horses, and built the first heated stable in Wicklow County. She would go to the stable every day and could see the horses in pasture from her study window. She loved her grandchildren and friends, and especially after it became harder for her to travel, she had visitors—not just close friends but also fans. She was very proud of her original painting of Michael Whelan's art—covers for her books.

**John Grayshaw: What is McCaffrey's legacy? Why was her work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?**

Quoting from the biography: "To millions of her readers and legions of fans, Anne McCaffrey is an icon, a magical presence, a writer whose books they devour, whose appearances at conventions they treasure, and whose fictions, websites, and fan clubs dominate their lives. Literary critics know Anne McCaffrey as a member of a ground-breaking group of women science fiction writers who forever changed the field, humanizing it through their emphasis on women's issues and plots. Librarians and editors know Anne McCaffrey as an extremely popular writer, one who is "review proof," whose name alone is enough to sell her latest book."

One of the twentieth century's best-loved and most widely-read writers. . . Anne was the first woman to win both the Hugo and the Nebula (1968), in the 1978 she became one of the first science fiction writers to have a book on the *New York Times Bestseller List*. In 1999, she received the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Literary Achievement from the ALA. In 2005, she was named a Grand Master by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, in 2006 inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

These honors recognize her ability as a storyteller who made women a part of literature set in the future and on other worlds, and who transformed dragons from monsters into intelligent and caring companions for humanity.