

**Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Lisa Yaszek (August 2022)**

Lisa Yaszek is a Regents' Professor of Science Fiction Studies at Georgia Tech. Her research areas include issues of gender, race, and science and technology in science fiction. She wrote "Sisters of Tomorrow: The First Women of Science Fiction" and "Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women's Science Fiction," which explore how women helped shape science fiction. She also edited the anthology "The Future is Female! Women's Science Fiction Stories from the Pulp Era to the New Wave." And a second volume "The Future is Female 2: Feminist Science Fiction of the 1970s" will be published this fall.

Damo Mac Choiligh: Where does Joanna Russ fit in the history of feminism? Would she have gone with the broad movement in to 3rd wave feminism? Or did she fit with categories like that, either in your or her own opinion?

Russ was absolutely a feminist of her time, and proud of it! She talked frequently about attending the Cornell Conference on Women in 1969 with Betty Friedan and Kate Millet consciously radicalized her and allowed her to come out as a lesbian. I teach her as part of feminism's second wave, sometimes known as the Women's Liberation Movement—a period when women built upon the political successes of the first wave suffragists by organizing and successfully lobbying for equal right in education and the workplace as well as a more equitable reorganization of labor in the home. In fact, when we study her that way, it often looks like she's literally dramatizing key feminist concepts of the era. For example, there is a passage in *The Female Man* that pays homage to Gloria Steinem's 1962 expose of sexism at Hugh Hefner's Playboy Bunny Clubs. Elsewhere in *The Female Man* and in the short story "When It Changed," Russ imagines an all-female utopia predicated on ova-merging that literally dramatizes feminist philosopher Shulamith Firestone's ideas in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) about the need for women to liberate themselves from patriarchy by seizing the technological means of reproduction for themselves.

Russ also anticipated ideas central to third wave feminists of the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s who argued that feminists needed to turn their attention to the gendered relations of science and technology and to the many different kinds of experiences women have in patriarchal culture based on their differing experiences of race and sexuality. We see Russ explore the issue of gendered technoscientific competency as early as "The Barbarian" (in which a woman from the past turns out to be far more logical and technically competent than a man from the future) and again in *We Who are About To...* (in which the narrator uses scientific reason in a failed attempt to stop her fellow travelers from trying to implement a pointless breeding program when they are shipwrecked on a deserted planet). As a pioneering lesbian author who explores diversity of people's sexual preferences and gender orientations in *The Female Man*, *The Adventures of Alyx*, and *(Extra)Ordinary People*, Russ very much anticipates the third wave celebration of women—as unified not by biology but by shared political goals and by her embrace of queer characters and perspectives.

Damo Mac Choiligh: Did Russ retain her perception of SF as a worthwhile literature into later life? I have always been struck by how she was optimistic about its potential, despite the extent to which it is dominated by writers and fans for whom her feminism was anathema or who simply did not understand it.

I've always liked Russ's optimism as well! Russ spoke often about how she began reading science fiction as a teenager because it promised her that "life could be different!" than the stifling world of midcentury America. And then many of her early critical essays were all about why SF is an important genre. And of course, she continued to write both professional SF and amateur "slash" fiction until her death. If her production slowed down in the 1980s and 1990s, it was largely due to health issues.

Having said that, Russ did become increasingly disenchanted with certain factions of the SF community as the 1970s unfolded. When Russ started out in the 1960s, she was actually quite well-received by the largely male/male-identified SF community because she wrote about the possibilities of science fiction as the premiere story form of modernity and her first really successful stories—the Alyx tales—followed the adventures of a strong, smart, successful woman living mostly amongst men. But then Russ began to write essays about the patriarchal limits of SF as it was currently practiced (in essays such as "The Image of Women in Science Fiction" and "Amore Vincent Foeminam!") and more literarily-experimental stories about all-female futures and the women who would go to war with men to preserve them, such as "When It Changed" (1972), *The Female Man* (1975), and *The Two of Them* (1978). This led SF authors and editors including Poul Anderson, Judy Del Rey, and Avram Davidson to publicly turn against Russ, dismissing her as a "second rate academic" masquerading as an author. Even Samuel R. Delany—a queer Black experimental SF author who was friends with Russ and who Russ was careful to include in important gender and SF events, such as the 1974 *Khatru* symposium on "Women and Science Fiction"—was quite critical of her writing at the time. Little wonder then, that Russ gave up her post as a reviewer for the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in 1980 and began to focus more on writing and publishing in feminist and lesbian venues—even if she never quit writing science fiction itself.

Damo Mac Choiligh: What did Russ make of the New Wave overall, once it had done its thing and been absorbed into the mainstream of SF? Aside from its experimentation with the form of writing, did she think it led to more progressive or inclusive literature or was it more hype than substance, like much of the sixties counterculture.

See my answer above: Russ appreciated the New Wave—and it appreciated her!—from the very start. In her position as a reviewer for F&SF under the editorship of Judith Merril, she was very much an interpreter of both the British and American New Waves for readers. It also makes sense that, as a sympathetic to a literary movement that was itself largely skeptical about the benefits of technoscientific culture. The problem for Russ, of course, is that even as they wrote stories questioning many of the same scientific and economic arrangements that interested feminists, many SF authors—male and female alike—failed to question gendered arrangements in their futures, leaving characters at best stranded in what she called "intergalactic suburbia" and at worst wandering through seemingly-edgy dystopias where women are stripped of all public and private rights. I just put together an anthology on science fiction of the 1970s, and it's

shocking how many artists responded to the loosening of pornography codes at the time by creating stories and art about naked (and often brutally raped and murdered) women. There are few if any stories that treat men the same way from this era, with the exception of a few anti-feminist dystopias meant to demonstrate the dangers of a world where women are politically enfranchised. No wonder she wanted a feminist SF of her own!

Eva Sable: As someone who had been aware of Ms. Russ, but has never read her work, is there a preferred entry point to her work?

I find my students enjoy starting with two short stories that demonstrate both the hopes and fears of feminists of that era—and that both demonstrate Russ’s killer storytelling skills: “The Barbarian” (1968) and “When It Changed” (1972). Fun because if you enjoy Alyx, you can then move on to the collected *Adventures of Alyx* (1976) which show Russ’s skills with a variety of genres including fantasy, SF, the pirate tale, and the lesbian romance. If you want to learn what happens to the women of Whileaway after Earth men “rediscover” them 500 years later, then you might read *The Female Man* (1975), one of Russ’s most difficult but also most rewarding novels.

If you want to explore Russ’s critical writing, I would recommend beginning with two groundbreaking essays: “The Wearing Out of Genre Materials” (1971, where Russ explains the literary and political value of SF); “The Image of Women in Science Fiction” (1970, in which she launches the first systemic analysis of patriarchal assumptions in SF), and “Recent Feminist Utopias” (1981, in which she defines feminist SF as stories that imagine futures where women have everything they lack in the here and now). After that, I’d recommend *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* (1983), a wickedly witty and insightful expose of 11 common methods used to ignore, belittle, or condemn women’s writing—many, sadly, we still hear leveraged against women and other culturally-marginalized artists today.

John Grayshaw: Can you say anything about the impact Russ has had on feminism more generally, outside of sf fandom?

Russ was very much a pioneering feminist scholar and public intellectual! Throughout her career she wrote about gender and genre for major publications including *The Village Voice*, *The Washington Post*, *The Feminist Review of Books*, and *Ms.* Much of her academic career focused on feminism as well, leading to the publication of several important essay collections about women, art, and culture, including *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* (1983); *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts: Feminist Essays* (1985), and *What Are We Fighting For?: Sex, Race, Class, and the Future of Feminism* (1997).

John Grayshaw: Sexism and feminism are themes in Russ’ books. In real life, how did she handle sexism, misogyny, and lack of diversity in science fiction authorship in the 60’s, 70’s and beyond? Did they present themselves as difficult obstacles to publication, especially in her early career? How did she overcome them?

See my answer to Damo Mac Choiligh, above. As Gwyneth Jones notes in her critical biography *Joanna Russ*, Russ was oddly patient and gracious with other members of the science fiction community—especially male tastemakers in the field. It’s unclear if she was simply respectful of

professionals she admired, or whether even as a radical feminist, she couldn't shake off her midcentury training to be a "good girl" who defers to men. In fact, as I think about it, there is a whole chapter in *The Female Man* dedicated to exploring this question as it pertains to the character who is most like Russ herself. So perhaps she was aware of that behavior and trying to figure it out, even in the 1970s.

Eventually, of course, Russ's patience wore thin, especially as the SF community experienced the same kind of feminist backlash that swept the rest of the US in the 1980s. She didn't stop writing science fiction, but she did start doing a lot more writing for feminists outside the SF community, including her marvelous books, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983); *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts: Feminist Essays* (1985), and *What Are We Fighting For?: Sex, Race, Class, and the Future of Feminism* (1997). And even when she did publish SF criticism in that era, she tended to do so in explicitly feminist collections, such as Marleen Barr's *Future Females* (1980).

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

I've been reading and watching science fiction all my life, and I first encountered Joanna Russ on my parents' bookshelf when I was just 10 years old (along with Judith Merril and Samuel R. Delany—so as you can imagine, years later I was quite surprised to learn that not all SF was quite so experimental!). Reading *The Female Man* at that age completely blew my mind. I had no idea what I was reading, I just knew I wanted to keep coming back to it to figure it out. Later, I appreciated both her anger with the world as it is and her ability to keep hoping, dreaming, and insisting that it could get better. Today, I still appreciate Russ as an avant-garde stylist and as a utopian dreamer. In fact, I might appreciate that latter part more than ever.

Speaking from a critical perspective, Russ is interesting because she so completely embodies a moment in literary and cultural history. She was a pioneering feminist SF author who showed us the limits of gendered SF as it had been written by previous generations of SF authors, who gave us our first SFF "sheroes," and who dared to protest that "men hog all the good things in the world"—and then dared to imagine futures where women did the same. Russ was also one of our first and best ambassadors to the literary world at a moment when SF was just being recognized as serious art. She was also one of the first female critics, and definitely the first to directly engage feminist issues in genre fiction. She single-handedly invented feminist SF criticism with the essays I've mentioned above and was one of the first members of the science fiction community to earn a tenured position in academia for working on feminism and science fiction.

And that brings me full circle, back to why I personally love Joanna Russ: she made the job I have today as a feminist science fiction critic and editor possible.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the authors of any genre whom Russ enjoyed reading and were her inspirations?

John Grayshaw: Did Russ have favorites of her own works?

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

I've grouped the above questions together because they are biographical questions that go beyond what I really know about Russ in my capacity as a literary historian! I'd recommend Gwyneth Jones's biography, *Joanna Russ* (2019) for answers to these questions.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about Russ' correspondence/friendship with Samuel Delany?

John Grayshaw: I would be interested to hear more about her associations with other feminist writers, and about her associations with other writers in general, too—friendships, creative connections, etc.

John Grayshaw: Any interesting stories about her corresponding/meeting with fans? Did she enjoy going to conventions?

I've never done formal research on these topics, but I've read enough of her letters to know that Russ did indeed have lively friendships and correspondences with writers including Samuel Delany, James Tiptree, Jr., and Sonya Dorman. I've read a few of her letters to Dorman and they are every bit as funny and savage as you'd expect. She was definitely passionate in her likes and dislikes and very vocal about other people—especially other women—who did not embrace feminism. She especially disliked Marion Zimmer Bradley for foisting her kids off on other writers at cons and respected but was extremely frustrated with Ursula K. Le Guin for taking so long to embrace the women's liberation movement. I've also seen a few of her letters to Tiptree—including the exchange in which Tiptree admits he is actually a woman named Alice Sheldon. Russ was pretty excited about that, writing to Tiptree that it made sense—after all, she, Joanna Russ, was a lesbian who had been falling in love with someone she thought was a man through letters, and was actually relieved to know Tiptree was a woman! At that point Tiptree/Sheldon admits to Russ that she is probably a frustrated lesbian, and Russ offers to help out with that, if they ever meet up.... Apparently it never happened, which is too bad—they might have made quite the sci fi power couple!

Most of Russ's correspondence is archived at the University of Oregon—if you're in the area, you can probably get a day pass to the library to check it out! You can also read some of her correspondence with Tiptree/Sheldon online at <https://oregondigital.org/sets/joanna-russ>.

John Grayshaw: Are any of Russ' works under option for movies or TV?

Not that I know of! Russ did write a piece called "Hungry Girls," which became an episode of the short-lived TV series *The Hidden Room* (1993), a *Twilight Zone*-type anthologies series focused on women's lives. And in 2001 Peggy Ahwesh produced a short, animated film called "She Puppet," which is a mashup of the *Tomb Raider* videogame series and Russ's *The Female Man*. But I suspect for the most part her vision is still too radical for mainstream Hollywood and television.

John Grayshaw: Are there any unpublished Russ works at an archive or in a drawer or is everything published?

Yes, there is a rich Joanna Russ collection at the University of Oregon. The Joanna Russ papers include both published and unpublished correspondence, fiction, non-fiction and academic work, Kirk/Spock fan fiction study and writing, and personal materials. The collection is free and open to the public at designated hours. You can learn more about the Joanna Russ papers here: <https://scua.uoregon.edu/repositories/2/resources/2177>. And for those of you who would like to take a peek at her correspondence with Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree Jr, you can do so here: <https://oregondigital.org/sets/joanna-russ>.

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

One of the most interesting things about Russ as a writer is that she didn't do research or revise. This is true of both her fiction and her criticism. For instance, when Russ published all the Alyx stories together in *The Adventures of Alyx*, she knew that she had randomly assigned Alyx different ages in different stories that didn't always match up correctly—most notably, Alyx is a scarred, graying, perimenopausal woman in her 40s in “The Barbarian,” but in later short stories, after she has been whisked to the future by the Trans-Temporal Authority, she is still scarred and graying, but somehow only in her 20s!

Similarly, Russ would make claims about authors, stories, and dates in her critical essays, then add footnotes explaining that her claim is based on her immediate recollection rather than actual research. She wrote so powerfully and authoritatively that many people simply accepted her pronouncements as truth—and still do now, even when they are not quite as accurate as Russ might have liked us to believe. One great example of this that I've come across in my own research has to do with Russ's pronouncements about women's SF before feminism; Russ tends to substitute one or two memorably bad stories for the sum of all women's SF before the 1970s in her critical writing, without ever acknowledging the diversity of that fiction or the possibility that it might have political or literary merit outside feminist and avant-garde standards. Of course, she was purposely making dramatic arguments to make a very real point about how and why women's SF was changing and to begin imagining what “feminist SF” might look like. As a cultural historian, those kinds of inaccuracies drive me nuts, but as a feminist scholar, I appreciate how and why she makes these rhetorical moves, and I'm indebted to her for constructing the first “herstories” of women in SF.

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

Russ's legacy is the legacy of feminist science fiction art and criticism! She was a pioneer in connecting the feminist and other progressive political energies of her time with the avant-garde artistic experiments of New Wave science fiction. She gave us some of our first “sheroes”—female characters who are every bit as strong, stubborn and righteous as their male counterparts, but who grow into their roles by embracing rather than rejecting their connection to family and nature, and who develop alternate (often better) moral and social codes for it. She also gave us some of the first stories in any genre to express the very real anger and the very real hope felt by

midcentury American women fighting to make the dream of democracy real for all—and she did it in a way that made you both gasp and laugh, all at once. Russ was the first to articulate clearly and consistently the limits of SF as it was written in her day as well as one of the loudest champions of what SF could and should be. In short, she imagined better futures for people and art alike.

Fifty years later, Russ's legacy is more important than ever. Many of the feminist issues Russ grappled with in her writing--sexism in education and the workplace, the struggle for reproductive autonomy, the routine dismissal of women's politics and art—are still with us today, or worse yet, back with a vengeance after simmering underground for years. Sometimes it can be difficult to negotiate a present that is as complex and contradictory and downright bewildering as our own, but looking backward to Russ's stories and criticism reminds us that we are not alone in either time or space; we can look to the past and use the tales told by Russ and other progressive-minded SF writers as templates for action in the present that will allow us to build truly new and better futures for all—all while enjoying a ripping good read. And in that respect, perhaps it's more accurate to end by saying the legacy of Joanna Russ is the legacy of all SF at its best: it is fantastic escapism that returns us to the real world refreshed and ready to do good.