

GUEST EDITORIAL

TEACHING THE METATEXT

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One of my favorite discussions with students, no matter what genre I'm teaching, is the relationship between author and reader. Specifically: what readers are expecting when they pick up a story written within a genre tradition.

For some genres, that discussion is easier—a mystery reader's expectation usually includes the solving of a crime. Romance involves a happy ending (for varying definitions of both "happy" and "ending"). Plots in these genres are often constructed around specific beats (the crime itself, the tracing of evidence, the resolution of the crime), and readers look forward to seeing how an author will resolve those beats.

When readers pick up a speculative story, the delivery of wonder and immersion—of a *feeling* in tandem with a *resolution*—is at the heart of what they want (for all of the many varying definitions of "wonder," "feeling," "immersion," "heart," "speculative," and "story"). SF often weaves plot elements from other genres straight through that delivery. James S.A. Corey's *Leviathan Wakes* and the corresponding *Expanses* television series has a backbone steeped in noir. Jack McDevitt's astroarcheological sleuths Alex Benedict and Chase Kolpath (*Seeker* et al.) follow a similar trajectory from charge to chase, to broader resolution. So too, Alette de Bodard's *The Tea Master and the Detective*.

Even with those helpful beats, speculative fiction's expectations skew broader. As Samuel R. Delany wrote of SF texts in *Starboard Wine*, "With each sentence we have to ask what in the world of the tale would have to be different from our world for such a sentence to be uttered—and thus, as the sentences build up, we build up a world in specific dialogue, in a specific tension, with our present concept of the real."

Students deep in the writing of one or more of these genres for the first time—or the fiftieth—can feel as if fantasy, horror, and science fiction all reside on the edge of readers' expectations, and in conversation with it. Sensing an alarmingly wide road to travel, students may ask: *Where are the guidelines? What is the right way to do this thing?*

Delany's description of the accretion of understanding is important here. And what he says is true not only of discussions about the validity of FTL (in theory and plot), but also to our debates about different literary movements and styles. See also: Michael Swanwick on the emergence of various circles ("A User's Guide to the Postmoderns") or Elizabeth Bear, Liz Bourke, and others discussing the punk-punk-punk proliferations of recent years.

Kelly Link, in her introduction to the 2015 edition of *The Bloody Chamber* notes, "The literature of the fantastic is peculiar in that stories are necessarily in conversation with other stories, dependent on other stories to achieve their effect. There is no such thing as a vampire, except in stories, *because* of stories."

What these authors and scholars are delineating is a particular aspect of the speculative: the promise of metatext as both a conversation among writers across time, as well as an immersive transformation of and sometimes *by* both the writer and the audience.

Science fiction is a genre where the reader's understanding and expectation adds to the enjoyment of (one hopes), or at least interaction with, a text. In *The Jewel Hinged Jaw*, Delany says: "... because science fiction is a genre, and is experienced through resonances set up in a vastly complex textus, contoured both negatively and positively by millions of words that include the finest of Sturgeon and the clumsiest of Capt. S.P. Meek, any attempt to write a science fiction novel generates an image of that book in some idealized way. The competition is with a writer-generated,

idealized form of the science fiction novel itself.”

As a writer, I’m fascinated by this mechanism in our genre. I love experimenting with the drivers of metatextuality, expectation, and storytelling.

As an educator, I’ll be honest. This concept is really hard to teach, especially when students just want to finish a story.

Something else Delany wrote in *The Jewel Hinged Jaw* helps tremendously. In fact, when I first read it, it stuck with me so much that it transformed over the years into a whole discussion and set of expectations in my mind: that science fiction is a meta-textual genre—a conversation among readers and writers. When Sheila charged me to “explain this,” I asked Max Gladstone, Amal El-Mohtar, and Jamie Rosen for their memories of the book.

We found these seeds: “The vision [sense of wonder, if you will] that SF tries for seems to me very close to the vision of poetry. . . .” and “. . . the image is not only an image in a chain of images, it is a detonator dropped into a reader’s imagination organized to a certain potential of response by previous effects and images—a response the new image releases. . . .”

Reading this passage while a student transformed my understanding of SF. That reveal of science fiction’s heart: poetry, image, conversation. Both Delany’s words then and the conversations that have followed accrued meaning for me as a writer and a teacher. At its heart, this is another layer of the metatext: a conversation that is part of the expectation between writers and readers in SF. It, above everything, transforms what we do into a deeper and wondrous type of communal storytelling.

So, how to mentor someone in the act of circumscribing wonder? My solution: actively engaging the metatext of our genre, participating within the broader conversation about our world of possibility and impossibility, and encouraging students to do so as well.

What emerges from these conversations bears with it its own sense of possibility and wonder.

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