

## **Extract from Heiresses of Russ 2012**

We humans have a compulsion, possibly perverse, occasionally useful, to categorize everything. To say our theme is the wide variety of lesbian speculative fiction being published today doesn't do much to let you know what you'll find in *Heiresses of Russ 2012*. The only way to demonstrate what's in store for you is to introduce the stories themselves, and for that, sorting them into categories familiar to readers may have its uses after all.

Most speculative fiction is divided into science fiction and fantasy, which is not to claim any universal agreement as to the definitions or differences. Our table of contents includes three clearly science fiction stories: "Feedback," Lindy Cameron's hard-edged novella of far-future technology, crime, and law enforcement; "God in the Sky," An Owomoyela's story of an unexplained astronomical phenomenon; and Sunny Moraine's "The Thick Night," in which African villagers in need of aid are sent automatons instead of Peace Corps workers to help them farm their land. But the last two can be read on different levels, with an automaton coming so close to personhood as to suggest something beyond the workings of science, and the mysterious light in the sky inspiring reflections on family, humanity, and religious traditions.

The remaining stories all have elements of fantasy, but in varying ways and degrees. Three fit under the broad tent of the Steampunk movement, combining retro-science with fantasy. Katherine Fabian's "In Orbit" deals with the construction of orreries as balance wheels for the creation of golems. "Amphitrite" by S.L. Knapp solves the problem of mermaids in the Caribbean who lure men with their songs, and then devour them, by permitting only female submarine pilots. And in "To Follow the Waves," Amal El-Mohtar's protagonist imbues crystals with dreams-made-to-order by means of the traditional art of gem-cutting.

At least one piece could be read as urban fantasy. David D. Levine's "Tides of the Heart" features a plumber who possesses superpowers when it comes to water in pipes, and rescues a figure from classical mythology (with the aid of new laws on same-sex marriage). Another, Emily Moreton's "Daniel," is firmly in the traditional pirate-tale corner, with weather-magic thrown in. Desirina Malkovitch's "Thirteen Incantations," with two teenaged girls who sample magical memory spells formulated into exquisite (and exquisitely described) perfumes, could easily be included in a YA anthology, although it would be a shame to limit it to that audience.

"Out of the Strong Came Forth Sweetness" by Lisa Nohealani Morton is harder to categorize. There are elements of biblical allegory, made clear by the title; far future science fiction, with spaceports and law-enforcement "Angels" wearing technological wings and laser eyes in a repressive dystopian culture; and witchcraft, with a protagonist who gains strength from the hair she cuts and styles so skillfully for her customers. Then, in "Ours Is the Prettiest," Nalo Hopkinson creates an aura of desperate carnival gaiety and an "other world" that may fit into what Delia Sherman, one of the editors of the

Borderland series of anthologies, terms the “interstitial” mode, falling between, rather than within, familiar boundaries.

The vampire story subgenre is represented in “La Caída” by Anna Meadows, with traditional tropes left behind in this story of a fallen angel and a family of sisters in Mexico with their own tradition of using their inherited taste for blood to punish the evil rather than corrupt the good. This could have been classed as horror, but is instead, in its own idiosyncratic fashion, sweet and uplifting.

This brings us to the actual supernatural horror department. Two of our authors contributed pieces that are arguably horror, but their similarity ends there. Laird Barron’s “The Carrion Gods in Their Heaven” fits into the werewolf subgenre, achieving its effect with a brooding atmosphere and an accumulation of details creating a sense of impending and inevitable doom, while Steve Berman in “D Is for Delicious” wields a superbly keen and macabre wit to show a retired schoolteacher’s discovery of the benefits of being a witch. One story evokes shivers of foreboding; the other induces guilty laughter combined with visceral shudders.

So there you have the bare-bones tour of the stories in all their complex variety. The quality of the writing itself is even more impressive. Lyrical or somber, mannered or transparent, lush with imagery or stark in effect, witty, poignant, realistic, seductive, even numinous at times; whatever their stories demand, these writers supply with skill and creativity.

You may have noticed that I included “seductive” in that list. Yes, there are a few erotic elements, although most are subtle. Lesbian themes don’t automatically involve sex, but they certainly don’t preclude it. Several of the stories also include elements of romance, no more nor less than can be found in speculative fiction in general, and not by any means the “cookie-cutter” variety so often attributed, rightly or wrongly, to lesbian fiction.

What Joanna Russ and our other feminist forbears might find lacking is political content, but I think they’d catch the subtle metaphorical references. I was struck by the fact that when repressive societies were depicted in these stories, they tended to be obsessed with railing against witchcraft and magic to the near-exclusion of getting hot and bothered about lesbian relationships. If they noticed them at all, they considered them part of the evils of magic. With our real-life history of women who transgressed societal boundaries being persecuted as witches, the symbolism is clear enough.

For all my talk of variety and writing skill and freedom from outdated constrictions and expectations, the fundamental purpose of fiction is to be enjoyed by its readers. Our worthy mission was to highlight the breadth and quality of lesbian speculative fiction published during the past year, but our even higher purpose has been to provide a book that any readers with a taste for quality science fiction, fantasy, horror, and all their permutations will enjoy.

A special note for all the lesbians who tell me how hard it is to find literate, engrossing speculative fiction stories with fully-developed lesbian characters:  
Here you go. I hope you enjoy the trip.