

informed by a greater familiarity with the science fiction genre. Karen Hellekson brings her deep understanding of alternate history to “Alternate History and Dislocation in Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man*”, arguing that this novel’s complexities can be made somewhat clearer by means of Hayden White’s distinction between the eschatological, genetic, entropic, and teleological models of history. Steven Kagle’s “Alternate Views of Time and History in Orson Scott Card’s *The Tales of Alvin Maker*” provides some insight into Card’s fiction by means of the author’s religious background, a background that, Kagle argues, requires the reader to seriously reconsider our conventional understanding of history.

While this group of essays provides a thorough (if prismatic) examination of the main body of alternate history fiction, the book is at its most refreshing when it reaches beyond the limits of the Anglo-American “text-only” tradition. Darren Harris-Fain provides a glimpse outside of this tradition in “Authentic History, Alternate History, and Alternate Future History in Superhero Graphic Novels, 1986-1996”, as does Claire-Antoinette Lindenlaub in “Gallic Paradoxes: *The Great Implosion*, A French Alternate History.”

A recurring theme throughout the volume is the continuing need for a systematic poetics of alternate history, or at least a thorough taxonomy of the genre. This need is illustrated by the title of William Hardesty’s “Toward a Theory of Alternate History: Some Versions of Alternative Nazis”, and stated explicitly in Chapman’s introduction. Karen Hellekson’s *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Kent State, 2001) represents a solid foundation for such a poetics, as does Chapman’s identification of the three developmental stages of the genre in his introduction to this volume. As a whole, this group of essays represents significant progress toward that goal. It also offers a number of intriguing glimpses—from a variety of angles—into a fascinating genre.

FICTION REVIEW ESSAY

Frek and the Elixir

Eric Drown

Rucker, Rudy. *Frek and the Elixir*. New York: Tor, 2004. 560 pages, hardcover, \$27.95. ISBN 0765310589.

Rudy Rucker is best known as the author of *Software* (1982), *Wetware* (1988), *Freeware* (1997), and *Realware* (2000). These short, fast-paced, counter-culture-inflected novels take the postmodern premise that our social realities are absurd and malleable, especially when radically transformative technologies escape the confines of the laboratory and, in the hands of hackers and hucksters, become wildly recombinative. As such, he inherits the stylistic and thematic mantles of such past masters as Philip K. Dick (*Martian Time Slip*, 1964 and *Ubik*, 1969), John Brunner (*The Shockwave Rider*, 1975), and John Sladek (*The Muller-Fokker Effect*, 1970). A trained mathematician and recently-retired computer science professor at San José State University, Rucker has also written picaresque tours of the mindscapes of major mathematicians and scientists. *White Light* (1980) riffs on Georg Cantor’s Continuum Problem searching for personal transcendence in transfinite set theory. *Spaceland* (2002) follows the lead of Edwin Abbot’s *Flatland* (1884) and imagines what our 3-dimensional world looks like when seen from 4 dimensions, even while skewering the cultural pretensions of Silicon Valley. And, while I suspect few readers actually learn set theory or come to a deep understanding of extra-dimensional space, the impression gained from reading Rucker’s novels is that our physical and intellectual realities are at least as absurd as our social ones.

Frek and the Elixir is the story of a 12-year-old boy whose desire to reconcile with his absent father is entwined with a special destiny to negotiate a deal for the exclusive rights to broadcast the Earth on the Humanity Channel. Along the way, he develops qualities to redeem his father, save humanity from the mental slavery of the mass media, and repopulate the Earth’s biome. At the start of the novel, Frek’s Earth is beset by a “Monoculture” perpetuated by big government (embodied in sentient tyrannical pinworms), big business, and big media. Though the monoculture works against their interests, middle class consumers are complicit with it. They trade their intellectual and cultural freedoms for the convenient commodities produced by NuBioCom, the global corporation that crashes the Earth’s biome to guarantee the success of its bioengineered “kitters” (living organisms that double as appliances, recreational devices, and even homes). Growing up in this monoculture, the key to Frek’s development as a hero is his mind-expanding encounters with physical, biological, intellectual and cultural diversity. Adventuring with the help of a talking alien cuttlefish, a genetically engineered talking dog, and a ballad-singing Grulloo, Frek must comprehend the motives of his slightly-addled anti-conformist Father, a six-breasted Temptress, a time-bending Magic Pig, and a bickering couple of clamshell-headed hermaphrodites in order to realize his goals. Moreover, if he is to defeat the evil monocultural broadcasters and establish a truly polycultural world, he must learn to operate according to the

physical and social rules of both the plain brane of our universe and the Planck brane in which it is embedded. (For more on branes, see the note below). Full of twists and transformations, rife with references to the history of art, popular culture, and science fiction, and salted with social criticism, *Frek* is a typical Rucker novel, albeit one aimed more at a juvenile audience than the titles cited above.

What makes *Frek* different from Rucker's previous work is that it closely follows the structure of the "Monomyth" synthesized in Joseph Campbell's 1948 work, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. According to Campbell, the world's apparently diverse mythologies share more than just an underlying structure; they have a universal meaning best decoded by means of psychoanalysis. The upshot is that the hero myth is a narrative form of the rites of passage that mark the psychological and social maturation of the individual. Rucker combines the insights of *Hero* with the motifs and conventions of contemporary art and popular culture to give *Frek* greater symbolic and cultural resonance than it might otherwise have. As readers gain more experience in *Frek*'s worlds, the references to paintings by Bosch and Magritte, and the invocations of Donald Duck (here in his Vietnamese avatar Da Nha Duc) and the Powerpuff Girls (Goob Dolls) stop being mere intertexts, and ultimately become a working mythology for postmodernity. Rucker's reworking of the Monomyth is both innovative and entertaining.

Unfortunately, use of the Monomyth jeopardizes Rucker's polyculture theme.

Publishing *Hero* just after World War II, when the apocalyptic threats of cultural difference and societal conflict were readily apparent, Campbell desperately wanted to find latent signs of unity in the manifest content of the world's cultures. Though he refused to go as far as Nietzsche in championing the complete autonomy of the individual (*Beyond Good and Evil*), Campbell distrusted the wisdom of societies that asked individuals to subordinate their own needs to its imperatives (cf. Freud's *Totem and Taboo*). As his turn to the master key of psychoanalysis suggests, Campbell saw neurosis as the dominant symptom of the failures of modern society. His essentializing analysis of world myth argues that only free thinking, fully mature individual men following their own code of behavior could redeem society and preserve the possibility of civilization. As *Frek*'s heroic resolution indicates, Rucker is clearly attracted to the notion that smart and capable individuals of special gifts are capable of redeeming themselves, their society, and perhaps even a suburban lifestyle! But the Monomyth is, as Campbell argues, essentially a narrativization of rites of passage. According to Arnold van Gennep (*The Rites of Passage*) and Victor Turner (*The Ritual Process*), such rituals only temporarily separate individuals from the constraints of their society. While the middle liminal stage of the three-part rite is precisely about reconfiguring the status of the ritual subject by means of ordeal and self-discovery, the last stage of the rite necessarily reintegrates the reconfigured individual into society. It is not society that is transformed, rather because of the knowledge and experience gained, the individual sees society in light of his newly gained perspective. As a result, and in spite of the revolutionary promises of its narrative, most often rites of passage work to accommodate individuals to the existing conditions of existence.

Though van Gennep's 1909 work was readily available to him, Campbell's postwar desire to avert the apocalypse made necessary a strategic misreading of the social functions of passage rituals. Likewise, given his own historic location in what he sees as a transnational monoculture, Rucker's choice to use the story of heroic individualism as a mode of cultural criticism is understandable, but, I think, ultimately ineffective. Because of their hope for the revolutionary potential of the myth of the heroic individual, neither Rucker nor Campbell seem to notice that it has been thoroughly appropriated as a tool of accommodation by the intertwined monocultures of big government, big business, and the mass media. Moreover, as is clear but unacknowledged in Campbell (for years a beloved professor at Sarah Lawrence!), the Monomyth is a key buttress of patriarchal authority. To be fair, Rucker's writer's notes (see www.rudyruicker.com/frek) clearly indicate his desire to provide compellingly authentic female characters for his girl readers. But when it's time for the penultimate battle with the branecasters, only the men go on. The women (*Frek*'s friend Renata, her mother Yessica, and even *Frek*'s dog's girlfriend Woo) all return home to wait it out. Renata and *Frek*'s youngest sister Ida do participate in the final battle. But Ida's inclusion feels like a sop to me; she's there to kick the Magic Pig in the butt. And while Renata revives the battered *Frek* at a crucial point in the battle with a pictorial recap of the adventure, the final image is of *Frek* and Renata as a couple. As one character puts it, Renata has been "helping [his] body latch on to [his] soul." If *Frek* is Campbell's Hero, "the one who comes to know," Renata is Campbell's Goddess, representing the "totality of what can be known" (*Hero*). Explicitly cast as *Frek*'s "girlfriend" at the end of the novel, Renata's role is to help *him* understand the full meaning of his adventures. Not only must *Frek* be convinced that he is capable of taking effective individual action even though triumph over the forces of social control is never permanent, but he must also synthesize a fully mature self, one capable of integrating the mundane and spiritual. Newly positioned as an adult in his web of social relations, taking up the name/mantle of the/his Father, *Frek* finds happiness in the "freedom to live" the manly art of the deal, the material comforts of the suburban home, and the

spiritual delights of the couple. In my view, a novel given to retrofitting the Monomyth should offer its characters more innovating alternatives than the social relations encoded in a 1950s backyard barbeque. Renata's final proclamation that the adventure is not yet over can be read against the grain to suggest that her own adventure lies ahead. Partial answer to this criticism can be found in Rucker's writer's notes, where he records some ideas about what a Monomyth for women would look like. Perhaps in a few years we will have a quest for Renata, one where women too can be the innovative and ennobling heroes of their own transformative adventure.

As much fun as *Frek* is, and however ambitious the attempt to rework the Monomyth, the novel does not by itself capture the *frisson* of life in the age of globalizing postmodern corporations. Unlike the best novels of Dick, Bruner and Sladek, and even unlike Rucker's own *Ware* series, *Frek's* mythic form obscures the relations among the nodular structure of postmodern subjectivity, the variable power of cultural institutions, and the ubiquity of the marketplace as the Planck brane of postmodern society. Despite occasional limitations, the great strength of all of Rucker's novels is that they invite readers to think about the connections and disjunctions between apparently unrelated fields of knowledge. Thinking about the costs of mass media in terms of cutting-edge physics and old-fashioned cultural criticism can be provocative. As a result, *Frek* can be used to interrogate how people immersed in complex social relations come to understand and experience them using whatever symbolic resources they have at hand. Read as part of an intergenerational conversation on how mythic (or fictional) narratives mediate relations between individuals and societies (see the texts cited above), and in the company of, say, David Harvey's *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, *Frek* could be an important text in any course seeking to articulate the links between modern and postmodern culture. In addition, critics interested in the hundred-year wave of "crises of masculinity" will find much to discuss in *Frek*, given the novel's central focus on a troubled Father-son relationship cast in a heroic adventure plot. Matched with any of the fine recent histories of masculinity (see the first chapter of Tom Pendergast's *Creating the Modern Man* for a review of the literature), *Frek* invites exploration of the intersection between the ideologies of adventure stories and the masculinities at the center and margins of contemporary society.

(NB. The idea of branes comes from recent superstring theory. See www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2002/04/020429080540.htm for a readable description of how it is being used to rethink the origins and shape of the universe).

FICTION REVIEW

Collected Short Fiction of C. J. Cherryh

Edward Carmien

C. J. Cherryh. *The Collected Short Fiction of C.J. Cherryh*. New York: DAW, 2004. Hardcover, 656 pages, \$23.95. ISBN 0-7564-0217-4

This is indeed the collected short fiction of C.J. Cherryh, noted award-winning science fiction and fantasy writer who has nearly 30 years under her belt and more than 60 titles to her credit. First published by DAW Books in 1976, she is an example of what James Gunn notes as a generation of writers brought to the public's eye not largely via the magazine culture and industry but via her novels. As a result, Cherryh reverses the traditional path of the writer (despite her short story sales of the late sixties) of fantastic literature, which begins in the short form and develops into the novel. Her stories are often quite long, but not always, and as a self-taught writer it is interesting to observe the development of her short story form, a form she gave close thought to only after several of her novels were on the stands. As she says in her introduction, she loves "the tale-telling concept, the notion that I can spin a yarn, rather than construct something architectural and precise." These stories are yarns, and very successful yarns, including Hugo Award winner "Cassandra."

The Collected Short Fiction of C.J. Cherryh consists of three major sections. *Sunfall* is reprinted in its entirety, along with a new addition to the sequence of stories set in Earth cities grown ancient over uncountable years. *Visible Light*, Cherryh's more "ordinary" anthology of short fiction from the mid-80's, is also present, along with a new tale. Fifteen previously uncollected stories round out this collection, including her notable "Pots" and newer fiction. Although published during a span from the late 70's to as recently as 2002, some of these stories reach farther back into Cherryh's writing history. The scope of skill on display provides a strong contrast for students of the craft of writing, as well as a detailed look at Cherryh's intense-third person approach in a wide variety of situations.

Scholars should find much here of use and interest. Cherryh utilizes two forms of direct address in this volume. One