

### Illusion And Expectation: WisCon 15 March 2 1991

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I'm going to talk to you today about illusion and expectation – and a little bit about science fiction.

As many of you know, when I'm not writing science fiction, I edit a quarterly magazine for the Exploratorium, a museum of science, art, and human perception. A few years ago, I published an article by a science writer named J.X. Cole, in which she examined a particular perceptual problem. And how it related to science fiction 00 and I'd like to share some of my thoughts.

I'll start with a story that is also a puzzle.

A rocket ship lands on a distant alien planet. For convenience sake, let's say it's a fifties-style rocket – kind of a Buck Rogers rocket with racing stripes and fins. The rocket lands and the captain sends out a landing party. Among the members of the party are a father – a middle aged rocket engineer named Frank—and Frank's strapping twenty-year-old son, Bob.

The landing party is not far from the ship when they are attacked by an alien monster that looks suspiciously like a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Frank is killed. In fact, everyone in the landing party is killed except for Frank's son, Bob, who hides in a convenient cave. The monster then turns on the ship, ready to attack.

For the sake of the rest of the crew, the captain must order the ship to take off, abandoning Bob. The bridge crew looks at the captain and the captain says, "I can't leave Bob behind. He's my son."

Who is the captain?

Think about that, and I'll tell you some other stories that may not seem to be related – but if you will be patient, you will see that they are.

At the Exploratorium, we have a three-dimensional illusion called the Ames room or the distorted room. This room is strangely shaped: the floor slants at a steep angle, one side wall is half the height of the other side wall; the back wall slants relative to the front wall. But when you look into this drastically distorted room from a particular vantage point, the room looks like an ordinary rectangular room. The walls are positioned so that they make a rectangular shape on the retina of your eye—and you assume that the room is rectangular.

Now suppose you are peering into the distorted room when a woman walks across the floor. This is where things get very strange. As the woman walks

across the room, she seems to shrink. When she is near one side wall, she appears to be a giant; when she is near the other, she is the size of a dwarf. To make the woman fit the distorted room—which your eye and brain insist on seeing as rectangular—you see the woman shrink and grow.

This is how your perceptual systems work. To make sense of the world, you often take perceptual shortcuts. You see what you expect to see, and you distort other evidence to fit your expectations.

Now for those of you who are still puzzling over the identity of the rocket ship captain, let me give an identity to the woman you saw walking across the distorted room. That woman is Bob's mom, who happens to be the captain of a fifties-style rocket ship.

We see what we expect to see. Conversely, we don't see what we don't expect to see—like a woman captain of a fifties-style rocket ship. What happen when people are presented with something that they don't expect to see, something unusual, something unfamiliar? Simple: they don't see it.

By way of example, let me tell you about seventeenth century Dutch scientist, Christiaan Huygens. Huygens observed Saturn through a homemade telescope and drew detailed pictures of the planet. Strangely, none of his pictures showed Saturn's rings; he didn't recognize the patterns he saw as rings. Nobody had ever thought of rings around a planet before, and it took some doing for Huygens to see them. Eventually he did see the rings, but it took him a decade to convince the rest of the scientific community that they were there. Rings around a planet were unheard of—and it took some doing to convince people that they were there.

Now, of course, any modern observer looking through a telescope no more powerful than Huygens', can see the rings around Saturn. Once you know they are there, it's easy to see them.

Now what—you are all muttering to yourselves—does all this have to do with science fiction—other than that silly rocket up at the beginning. Well, I'm getting to that. I'll tell you a few stories about me --you knew I had to get to that sooner of later.

A few months ago, I was talking to a

science fiction editor who is a friend of mine. We were talking about this and that, and in the course of conversation he happened to say, “Of course, you don’t write science fiction.”

Now I don’t always care what people call what I write, but I do like to understand why they call it one thing or another. And I’m curious about how people define science fiction. So I said, “What about ‘Rachel in Love’? That’s science fiction.”

And my friend said, “That’s not science fiction.”

I was really puzzled, so I said, “Using a method of neural transfer that I can justify scientifically, more or less, a scientist transfers his daughter’s personality and thought patterns to the brain of a chimp. That’s not science fiction?”

My friend frowned and got a little flustered and a little embarrassed and mumbled something or other. After a bit more uncomfortable conversation, it became clear that he had confused my story, “Rachel in Love,” with a story by another woman writer: “Her Furry Face,” by Leigh Kennedy. And as it turns out, “Her Furry Face,” though an excellent story, lacks many of the overt trappings of science fiction.

What seemed significant about my friend’s confusion was that is related to a persistent rumbling that I have heard echoing through science fiction. That rumbling says, in essence, that women don’t write science fiction. Put a little more rudely, this rumbling says: “Those damn women are ruining science fiction.” They are doing it by writing stuff that isn’t “real” science fiction; they are writing “soft” science fiction and fantasy.

But curiously enough, when I did write a story that was indeed “real” science fiction, my friend unconsciously edited his memory of my work. He assumed that women did not write “real” science fiction. And he changed his perception of my work to match his assumption. He saw what he expected to see.

Maybe that’s a petty example. Maybe my friend just has a rotten memory. So let me tell you another story.

Back in 1988 when my novel, *The Falling Woman*, was on the final Nebula ballot, I was at a dinner with a group of science fiction writers. The writer sitting beside me started talking with me about *The Falling Woman*. He asked me, quite politely, if I minded if he pointed out a problem with the book. I said, “Sure, I’d like to hear it.”

And he said, “There are no strong male characters anywhere in it.”

Now I found it interesting that he perceived this as a problem. I’ve never heard anyone criticize *Moby Dick* on the grounds that it has no strong female characters—no female characters at all, except for a couple of whales with bit parts.

Here again, the writer was interpreting my work

according to an underlying set of expectations and assumptions, according to his knowledge of the way the world worked. A good novel has strong male characters. So of course the absence of such characters was a problem. Obviously, not everyone agreed with that assessment, but it startled me that anyone—especially an intelligent writer—would be thinking in that way.

The problem was: he wasn’t thinking. He was relying on a set of assumptions. He saw the room as rectangular – and he distorted the rest of the world to fit.

So where am I going with all this? Am I just being cranky, or what? Well, I am being cranky, but there’s more to it than that.

We see what we expect to see, what we are used to, what is familiar. We count that as good, and we ignore whatever doesn’t fit. And people wonder if we still need feminism. People say that we’re doing with it, we’ve entered a “post-feminist” era. But I say that as long as the signs by highway say “Men Working,” we aren’t done with feminism. We still have those hidden assumptions, the expectations that we don’t even think about, the unconscious prejudices that influence our perceptions.

What can we do about these hidden assumptions? How can we change them—and I say “we” here because I think we all have to work at this, not just a few men, and not just a few women. What can we do?

That brings me to a phrase I’ve never liked: “role models.” I used to think that having role models was a silly concept, but I’ve come to realize that I earned my black belt in karate only after I met a few women black belts—before that, it didn’t really occur to me that I could be a black belt. I’ve come to realize that reading Joanna Russ’ *Alyx* stories shaped my notion of women heroes. I’ve come to believe that to change the way that people think about women and men, we need to show people in different roles. We need to call attention to women engineers—and to men who are staying home and taking care of the kids.

So how can we do that?

A few months ago, I was talking with Richard Kadrey, a born trouble-maker. We were talking about women in science fiction and Richard, just to make trouble, said, “You know what would really piss people off? You ought to give out a women’s science fiction award.”

Interesting idea. It would make certain people very cranky. It would get the conspiracy theorists going, wondering, “What are those women up to now?” We envisioned a plexiglass cube with all this “women’s stuff” floating in it: little plastic babies and cooking pots and ironing boards and sewing machines.

Okay, it was just a joke, nothing more. But a few weeks later,

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I had dinner with Karen Fowler and I mentioned this joke. Karen is also a trouble-maker, but a very thoughtful one. She looking thoughtful and said, “You know, there is no science fiction award named after a woman.”

Let’s see: we have the Hugo (for Hugo Gernsback), the Theodore Sturgeon Award, the John W. Campbell Award, the Arthur K. Dick Award. No women. Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley, has been call the first science fiction novel, but there is no Mary Shelley Award.

And then Karen, who tends toward brilliance, said, “What about James Tiptree, Jr.?” And it seemed like such a perfect idea. James Tiptree, Jr., winner of multiple Nebulas, revealed in mid-career as Alice Sheldon, and forever after, in every introduction, revealed as Alice Sheldon. James Tiptree, Jr., who helped break down the imaginary barrier between “women’s writing” and “men’s writing.” James Tiptree, Jr., author of “The Women Men Don’t See.”

And so I wrote to James Tiptree’s estate, and they said, “It sounds like a fine idea.” And so I would like to announce the creation of the James Tiptree, Jr., Memorial Award, to be presented annually to a fictional work that explores and expands the roles of women and men. We’re still in the planning stages, but we plan to appoint a panel of five judges and we plan to finance the award—and this is another stroke of genius on Karen’s part—through bake sales. (If you want to volunteer to run a bake sale, talk to me after the speech.)

Now I know that people are going to say that science fiction has enough awards. I know people are going to say, “Pat why do we need another award?” And all I can say is—if you ask me why we need this award, then you haven’t been listening.

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