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## A DIALOGUE: SAMUEL DELANY AND JOANNA RUSS ON SCIENCE FICTION

The following interview took place in May, 1984 at the University of Washington. Samuel Delany, who is the recipient of the Hugo Award, and a four time winner of the Nebula Award, is the author of several novels, including *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, *Babel-17*, and *Dhalgren*. Joanna Russ is the author of four novels, including *The Female Man*, over 45 short stories published in wide-circulation magazines like *Galaxy* and various literary quarterlies, two story collections, *The Zanzibar Cat* and *The Adventures of Alyx*, and has received both the Nebula Award and Hugo Award.

JOHNSON: My first question is a broad and general one . . .

RUSS: The safe kind . . .

JOHNSON: Science fiction is probably one of the most popular forms of storytelling today . . .

RUSS: No, it isn't.

DELANY: Romances and movies . . .

JOHNSON: Well, increasing more popular than it *has* been, at least on one level.

RUSS: But most of it is fantasy—

DELANY: Romances and horror fiction, I think, are the two . . .

JOHNSON: Well, let me ask you this: Why do you think academics have not been as responsive as they should be in treating what is probably the most imaginative form of storytelling, and also the most intellectually vigorous, that is to say, in the exploration of ideas?

DELANY: Well, it simply hasn't come up by the proper provenance; it has come up in the pulp magazines, outside the traditional realms of literature, and when you go back to the nineteenth century, the same gesture that establishes literature also establishes *paraliterature*; you can't have one without the other. That's when literature was established as a set of texts with a certain order of value; you must therefore

have certain texts that are not of that order of value, otherwise you don't have the proper spread, and science fiction grew up in those texts that were not of that order of value . . .

JOHNSON: Wells is an exception.

DELANY: I don't think of Wells as science fiction; I don't think of anyone as science fiction, except what starts in the pulp magazines . . .

RUSS: Not H.G. Wells?

DELANY: No, I think that's didactic, late Victorian fables, which has a different—

RUSS: Even *The Time Machine*?

DELANY: Even *The Time Machine*

RUSS: He establishes a good many of the themes . . .

DELANY: But very little of the rhetoric that we associate with science fiction today. If we look at contemporary science fiction as a set of codes by which you make a text make sense in a particular way, Wells doesn't engage any of those . . .

RUSS: I always think he's in the same position as Shakespeare in that he is half of an old tradition, but at the same time beginning something new.

DELANY: Yes, I think he is. Lots and lots of things went into influencing the kind of writing that grew up in the pulp and that we call science fiction. But myself, I don't call science fiction anything that existed before the name itself came in 1929 . . .

JOHNSON: So you're saying it's specifically a form that arises in the '20s, with its own particular objectives?

DELANY: Yeah. The guy who decided there would be a thing called science fiction, Hugo Gernsback, indeed talks about Wells and Verne in the very first article where he coins the term, and he says that stories like this are what he wants to publish; nevertheless he is asking this in 1929. Wells and Verne were anywhere from fifteen to a hundred years earlier, so that really you can't call it the same thing. There is no con-

tinuity from that. There is a kind of gap between that and what we think about as science fiction now.

JOHNSON: Let me ask another question, probably one you've been asked before. When I look at Joanna's work what I see is an interrogation of fantasy, science fiction, and horror literature for the sexist values they embody; a sort of cultural critique is happening in her work and, on another level in stories like her adventures of Alyx, she is claiming this literature for women. How do you, as a black writer, feel about this entrance of blacks and women consciously *as* blacks and women into the field?

DELANY: Well, again: science fiction grows up outside this established set of literary texts and I think it's always easier to appropriate the margin; it always has been for blacks and women, for anyone who is in a marginal position. In that sense, this is what people in a marginal social position have been doing constantly, appropriating what is marginal in the rest of cultural production, so that's nothing new. What causes the problem of course, the conflict, is when people in a marginal position try to appropriate the center. And that really goes back to your first question: Why aren't people who are in the center of the spotlight looking to what is in the margins? Well, they never have, and there's not too much reason to expect them to do terribly much about it other than in a token way.

RUSS: Science fiction is a natural, in a way, for any kind of radical thought. Because it is about things that have not happened and do not happen. It's usually placed in the future, but not always. It's very fruitful if you want to present the concerns of any marginal group, because you are doing it in a world where things are different. I was talking to an ex-Mormon, and she said it was science fiction that had gotten her out of the ethos she had been born into, and she said it was not the characters but the landscapes, which of course was the *piece de resistance* of the '30s or in the '40s—those landscapes made her understand that *things could be different*. In many social encounters and in many discussions, I've had a terrible time because the one thing my opponents do not have is the sense that things could be different . . .

DELANY: For example, science fiction is the only place an American adolescent can go to find a picture of society that by definition is better than ours . . .

RUSS: Or simply not the same . . .

DELANY: But the idea that there may be a society somewhere in the universe that is actually better than the old United States . . .

RUSS: A very revolutionary idea when you're fourteen . . .

DELANY: . . . one that suggests we may not be the best of all possible worlds . . . This kind of thing is quite eye-opening to bright thirteen or fourteen year olds heading forth into the university system to whatever vocation they're going to end up with.

JOHNSON: Back to your phrase, "paraliterature." Will you define that?

DELANY: I'm using literature as a generic term; I'm referring to science fiction as a something that happens, historically, as growing up outside the realms of literature, a *paraliterature*, if you will.

JOHNSON: Yet, your own work has been highly praised, especially by critics for investigating large cultural phenomenon, *i.e.*, language, and for advancing what has been called the New Wave in science fiction.

DELANY: Well, some of it has sold very well, and that's always very nice. The other thing is that in a social field such as the United States you tend not to have a real center anymore. You tend to have lots and lots of centers; so talk of centers and margins becomes a more and more strained metaphor after a certain point. Nevertheless, when you realize that there are lots and lots of sub-populations, each with its own center and margin, it still has some validity.

JOHNSON: Why did you select science fiction as your field for expression?

DELANY: I don't think I really *did* select it; it selected me. I always liked to read it; it gave me a lot of pleasure as a reader, so at a certain point I started writing it.

JOHNSON: Any particular authors that have been very influential?

DELANY: I liked Heinlein. I liked Theodore Sturgeon, who has always been my single favorite writer . . . I liked Merril and Kathryn McClean, although as a kid I think I read mostly for story, for the science fiction experience, and I wasn't terribly concerned with who had written it, which I think still goes on today. Your average science fiction reader is less concerned with creating an author figure than with just reading.

JOHNSON: You're mentioned often among the "New Wave" science fiction authors. How do you see yourself in this trend?

DELANY: Well, I think New Wave is one of those over-used terms. New Wave, as a meaningful term, referred to a bunch of writers associated with the British magazine, *New Worlds* between 1965 and 1968, and I wasn't part of it, as much as I might have liked to be. I was writing space operas with people diving through suns and things like that, and they had a more serious program that was a lot more sensitive to experimental writing. The kind of stuff I was doing wasn't and still isn't all that terribly experimental, otherwise it wouldn't be anywhere near as popular as it is, but I was very much in sympathy with what they wanted to do, and I thought it was a very good thing, and I was very excited by it as a reader. But as a writer I was just a kind of fellow traveler rather than really involved with it. The thing is, of course, that when the term moved away from that particular group in 1970 or so, it brought this whole oppositional model that says if there's a New Wave, there has got to be an *Old Wave*, somewhere; so instead of an island of production in the vaster sea of Science Fiction production, you get this notion of a sort of unlocateable set of oppositions that propogates throughout the whole of science fiction; that's the New Wave in most people's minds, and it really doesn't refer to anything. By the time you get to the mid-seventies any writer who was under forty, or with liberal political tendencies or at all aesthetically interesting, or who was writing a new book, had been called New Wave, so the term was kind of generalized out of all meaningfulness. I'm much more aware of how what I'm doing relates to what's been done in the past, then how it breaks with what's been done in the past.

JOHNSON: Then you see no significant, large trends—new ones—in the field of science fiction?

DELANY: (Laughter) No. I think a little bit more care is being paid to the sentences that construct the textual object; I think there is a lot more sensitivity to the various ideological positions that one is forced to take as soon as one picks up a pen, or sets one's fingers on a set of typewriter keys. And this I think is a good thing. One would like to see that spread outside the realm of science fiction, and become a little bit more generally the case for other fiction.

JOHNSON: What would you tell a young person interested in science fiction? What should they do to prepare themselves to write in this field?

DELANY: The only valid thing, of course, that you can say to anyone who comes to you is DON'T. It's a terribly difficult way to survive, if you'd like to try to survive entirely by writing. It's all but impossible. One of the things I always say to any creative writing class I have to talk to: only about two-percent of all professional writers in this country can actually support themselves by their writing. When you realize how many writers there are, you get some sense of just what that means. Statistically, you've got a better chance of going to Hollywood and becoming a superstar in the movies than you do of becoming a successful writer. And I think it's a good idea for people to know this. I think most people want to be writers because they don't want to do other kinds of work.

RUSS: How can you say things like that?

JOHNSON: What do you tell writers?

RUSS: I say, *DON'T!*

JOHNSON: Do *you* see significant changes in the field?

RUSS: Well, there's a new crop of people who came up during the late '60s and the early '70s. They were at the time our promising, young writers, they're not now. I would say in biographical terms they were people who had been brought up primarily with a literary education, but who saw no conflict between that and science fiction, and they were people who were living in a science fiction world for perhaps the first time. It was fact. A post-atom bomb world we grew up in. We didn't meet it as adults, it was part of the condition of the world we grew up in. I'm a little older, but I remember that as being a childhood event. What happened is that you got people writing science fiction as if it was simply another kind of writing . . . In the '50s you had people who primarily had grown up reading science fiction, but they were not poets or playwrights or basically literary people. In fact, the early published works of Fritz Lieber is unbelievably awful, and he made himself into a writer, his last, mature work is good . . .

DELANY: I think somehow the allegiance of those writers was toward some view of journalism . . .

RUSS: Allegiance, right. That is the word.

DELANY: Rather than to literature or to high art . . . One of the things

I'm always struck with, when I hear writers from that generation talk, is that they expected the story in six months to have absolutely vanished from the face of the earth. They didn't expect anyone to read it ever again; there was no reason even to save a copy of the manuscript . . .

RUSS: And of course they now are being ridiculously reprinted in a grand manner.

DELANY: There was no sense that they were doing anything that they thought of as permanent. They were very sincere people, though; and they were messianic about science fiction, and what it could do. Nevertheless, the text itself was just a medium for what they were doing . . . it was nothing to be preserved, or worked over very hard.

JOHNSON: What do you *not* see right now in science fiction that you would like to see, that you think is necessary, that would be crucial . . .

DELANY: Not doing six books a year. Some change in the economic situation, which I don't think is going to happen, but would allow some of the younger writers to make a living at it.

JOHNSON: Could you explain the economics of the field? Is there pressure for this kind of productivity?

DELANY: Yes, there tends to be, and if you can't meet that you either have to go up or down, you either have to get squeezed up or squeezed down. If you're a person who does three books in two years (which is a lot for most people, someone who is trying to make their entire living from writing . . .) it is possible to make a living in science fiction. A fair number of people do it. But you're going to be squeezed up or down. You're not going to be able to just stay there . . . and of course most people are squeezed down. You're either going to have to write more at bulk and lower quality, and be paid less for each, or you're going to have to write fewer at more quality and be paid more for each.

JOHNSON: Has the interest shown by Hollywood and television in science fiction helped its authors?

DELANY: I think what they do is interest people in science fiction movies. First of all, the people who make science fiction movies very, very rarely turn to science fiction written in order to get their material or their writers. Phil Dick's *Blade Runner*, and Herbert's *Dune* are about the only ones..

RUSS: In *Blade Runner* they were very good with the periphery of the film and awful with the center, and that was obviously a conscious decision. They don't help science fiction, because when they are popular they have nothing to do with science fiction . . . like *Star Wars*, spaceships that whoosh as they go by, you know, that kind of stuff.

DELANY: I think what happens is you have a nice, successful *Star Trek* film, or *2001*, or *Star Wars*, or *Return of the Jedi*, and the publishers then put pictures that suggest *2001* or *Star Wars* or *Return of the Jedi* on the covers of all the books, and kids who have seen the movies run in and take the books off the shelves and open the first page and discover there are *words* on the page. The whole process stops right there. People who see movies aren't readers. There is overlap, of course, but the millions who go out and enjoy a movie are a different population from the 50,000 to 250,000 who buy.

RUSS: There is one qualification. There have been science fiction movies made that were not successful, were not popular, but were made because someone *really* wanted to do them. I'm thinking about *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, and *THX-1138* . . . These were not terribly successful, but some of them, even *A Boy and His Dog*, which I loathe for obvious reasons, were in some ways very good. Very well done. These are much closer to the kind of thinking and the kinds of effects that you get in science fiction writing. (To Delany) Science fiction uses language literally . . . I think you once said that it uses metonymy instead of metaphor. This literalness of science fiction language showed up the other day in one of my classes. We came to a story where someone lit up a Camel . . . and the whole room just burst into laughter because they were so used to this literal use of language that for a moment they saw a camel. A real one with four legs and a tail! And I said, "You see what I mean? The literal use of language? You're so much in a science fiction mind-set that this cigarette, which is no longer a popular cigarette . . . what we read is *camel*. If he'd lit up his cigarette, no one would complain, even with a capital C. It was absurd because science fiction is first and foremost linguistically literal and I think also materialistic.

JOHNSON: Can you explain how you mean materialistic?

RUSS: I am myself, I guess, very much a materialist. That is, causes are material in the sense that ideas do not exist in Heaven . . .

DELANY: They have to be manifested in things . . .

RUSS: Ideas are not . . . You can't find them in Nature. You can't find, for example, Freudian symbolism in Nature, that's what I have against Freudianism . . . More explicitly, when I taught the story, "Nightfall," we found the story gave you what at first looked like a metaphoric scheme: *Knowledge is light*. And in many ways, not only in the action of the story, but the language of the story as well, in the little choices of words, "Light is knowledge," or "Light is reality." And you think what you're getting is a metaphor; then you turn it into a simile: light is *like* knowledge, or knowledge rather is like light. And there are so many different kinds of light in the story . . . the light of the stars, the light of those close-by suns, the light of burning cities. Then, once you've read the story you begin to realize that something else is going on. This is much too simple, and something more complicated than that, and much different is going on, and what finally happens is that what you thought was a metaphor isn't one. It is literal reality. What we know about the universe comes to us through that light—a faraway universe is nothing but light. The light of the stars is *all* we know, and most of our knowledge is light itself because we are not nocturnal, we are diurnal animals. Something like 80% of our information comes to us through sight. So what you have (in the story) is not a metaphor but a literal reality and the whole experience becomes cleansed and refreshed and beautiful.

JOHNSON: One last question to put a cap on things: Is it sensible to ask at all what science fiction is *about*?

DELANY: Asking what science fiction is about is like asking what is poetry, or what is the novel about? What is drama about? It's about anything you happen to want to write about, and using that particular convention and those particular forms, and you can say certain things about whatever you want to talk about that you can't say using any other conventions . . .