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**MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE:
Feminist Speculative Fiction and Cultural Politics
by
Jocelyne Voisin, B.A.**

**A thesis submitted to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

Department of Mass Communications

**Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
April 9, 1996**

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**MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE:
Feminist Speculative Fiction and Cultural Politics**

submitted by Jocelyne Voisin, B.A.

**in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts**

Thesis Supervisor

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April, 1996

Abstract

This thesis attempts to assess how feminist speculative fiction relates to broader feminist political projects and their activist agendas. While many literary critics have devoted themselves to the study of feminist speculative fiction, they have designated this genre as subversive without considering the context in which it is produced and consumed as a popular culture product. In this study, the three levels in negotiating the meanings of cultural texts - the institutions of production, the texts and the readers - are examined in light of two novels: *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) by Marion Zimmer Bradley and *Ammonite* (1992) by Nicola Griffith. The specific conditions governing the production of these two texts at Del Rey Books, a textual analysis informed by recent debates about the conflation of postmodernism and feminism, and a preliminary ethnographic analysis of the feminist speculative fiction readership constitute the principal areas of investigation in this analysis.

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I would like to thank Sheryl Hamilton, a brilliant colleague with a passion for feminist SF to match my own, for her witty remarks, her serious counsel, and her constant encouragement throughout this project. They were all very precious to me.

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Introduction

*"The great fantasies, myths and
tales are indeed like dreams..."*
Ursula K. Le Guin

In the course of writing this thesis, I have been forced to wrestle with various definitions and perceptions of feminism and to attempt to situate myself within its convoluted discourses. Feminist speculative fiction has played a large role in this intellectual and individual struggle. I have come to realize, however, that I will never succeed in finding a place within feminist discourse, because there is no final destination - only a continuous process of re-negotiation and re-evaluation. This process has lead me to understand, more than anything else, the complexity of the relationship between cultural texts, meanings and politics. Indeed, it is this rich point of intersection which I am attempting to investigate in this thesis about feminist speculative fiction.

Like Janet Wolff, I contend that culture plays a central role in the process of gender construction and thus, is also a "crucial arena for the contestation of the social arrangements of gender," (Wolff, 1990: 1). Feminist speculative fiction is an especially useful tool in cultural politics given its penchant for imagining alternatives to present social structures. In this sense, the central question underlining this project asks how feminist speculative fiction relates to broader feminist political projects and their activist agendas.

In recent years, many feminist critics have taken special notice of feminist speculative fiction as a genre which is particularly suited to undermining patriarchal discourse. Much of the academic work in this area, however, has concentrated on the text as the object of analysis. In other words, these critics are primarily literary critics. They have situated the subversive meaning of feminist speculative fiction almost exclusively in the text. My own analysis endeavors to demonstrate that meaning is not located in the text, but in a manifold process of negotiation between the institutions governing its production and distribution, the text itself and the context in which it is read. In short, only by investigating the larger sociological picture can we understand what a text actually means to the reader. Feminist speculative fiction can only be assessed in light of other discourses - 'mainstream' fiction, speculative fiction, academic feminism, readers and producers, among others. As such, my thesis includes an analysis of feminist speculative fiction at three levels where the meanings of cultural texts are negotiated: the institutions of production, the text and the readers.

This theoretical approach necessarily complicates the task of defining feminist speculative fiction: is it judged *feminist* in terms of its textual content or in terms of its relationship to discourses outside the text? This tension is well illustrated by debates among scholars who disagree over the classification of the same text as feminist. Although it would be simplest to point to a series of texts

and say: "those are feminist speculative fiction," I understand the need to establish a reference for the purpose of this analysis. My definition of feminist speculative fiction, then, is twofold: first, a definition of why this fiction is 'feminist,' and second, my use of the term 'speculative fiction.'

Although there are now many women writers in the speculative fiction genre, as well as many stories with strong female protagonists, not all these stories can be considered feminist. Thus, although strong female protagonists are an essential part of any feminist story, their presence does not make the story feminist, nor does the fact that the author is female. The novels I will be considering in this analysis are *feminist* in that they critically engage with discourses outside the text - discourses which construct gender relations and patriarchal social structures. My definition of feminist speculative fiction, then, is best articulated by Anne Cranny-Francis: "The text operates to reveal the contradictions and injustices within the dominant gender discourse and to make visible the strategies by which that discourse is naturalized" (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 25). In her earlier work, Marleen Barr defines feminist speculative fiction in similar terms as fiction which "makes the patriarchal structures which constrain women obvious and perceptible" (Barr, 1987: xx). These texts "challenge received notions of reality as it currently exists" (Armitt, 1991: 7), they are inherently skeptical of present social relations. In response to this skepticism of 'things as

they are,' feminist speculative fiction offers ideas of how things could be different and what that might mean. Feminist speculative fiction creates a space for feminists to articulate their dreams. The title of this thesis alludes to the desire of many feminist SF critics, writers and readers to see those dreams lead to real social change.

This skepticism of present social conditions is not unique to feminist speculative fiction; it is characteristic of all speculative fiction to certain degrees. Indeed, this is why I have chosen to call the genre 'speculative fiction,' or SF, because its distinguishing characteristic is an attempt to deal with alternate possibilities. But despite its journey into the unknown and unfamiliar lands of the imagination, SF is always inextricably linked to the real world. In the words of Jacqueline Pearson, SF is "wholly dependent on reality for its existence." (Pearson, 1990: 8). Darko Suvin defines SF as a literature of 'cognitive estrangement' whose "necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment..." (Suvin, 1988: 66). In other words, SF makes the familiar seem strange, engages with 'natural' discourses outside the text and unveils the constructed nature of our own social relations. As such, it is no wonder feminists have found the genre appropriate for the advancement of their own goals.

As a defining term, then, SF encompasses science fiction, fantasy, utopias, dystopias and the various subgenres within those larger categories. Discussion of 'genre' is always problematic, given that genres are ultimately categories defined and redefined by others - be they writers, publishers, critics or readers. Nonetheless, my own encompassing definition of SF is motivated by a desire to include fantasy within the discourse of feminist SF where it has been disregarded to a large extent. Much of the critical work in feminist SF emphasizes the science fiction and utopian aspects of SF while excluding its fantasy counterpart. This preference is most likely based upon a misconception of science fiction as predictive or more useful in imagining alternatives to patriarchy. However, fantasy holds as much potential for undermining patriarchy through the rewriting of myths and legends, as well as through imagining alternative universes immeasurably different from this one, and yet still reflective of it.

Although sharing the same speculative nature, fantasy and science fiction are often treated in isolation. Samuel Delany differentiates between the two genres in his assertion that fantasy treats what *cannot* happen, and science fiction, what *has not yet* happened" (in Russ, 1972b). In other words, fantasy deals with the impossible, where science fiction extrapolates on possibilities. As noted by Brian Attebery, however, there are no longer any clear boundaries between science fiction and fantasy (Attebery, 1992: 13). Formal, identifiable distinctions

between science fiction, utopias and fantasies are disintegrating with the growth of the field and the creation of hybrid genres such as science fantasy. Ursula Le Guin presents a strong argument for discussing fantasy and science fiction as a unified genre:

The fantasist, whether [she]he uses the ancient archetypes of myth and legend or the younger ones of science and technology, may be talking as seriously as any sociologist - and a good deal more directly - about human life as it is lived, and as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived. (Le Guin, 1979: 58).

As part of my goal to consolidate the relationship between science fiction and fantasy in academic analysis, and in order to limit the scope of this research, I have chosen two texts in this analysis of feminist SF: one fantasy and one science fiction. As a fantasy text, I have selected *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) by Marion Zimmer Bradley; a rewriting of the Arthurian legend from the women's points of view with an interesting comment on patriarchal religion. In terms of science fiction, I will be discussing a first novel by Nicola Griffith, *Ammonite* (1992); the story of one woman's journey to an alien planet where various cultures of women thrive without the presence of men. Although I realize these two texts are in no way representative of all feminist SF, my reasons for selecting them are diverse.

While I admit that my choice was partly based on personal preference, it was also made in light of theoretical and practical considerations for this

analysis. A large part of this project aims to investigate the as yet mysterious readership of feminist SF. Although there is a limited body of work addressing science fiction fandom, and even particularly looking at women *Star Trek* fans,¹ SF critics have virtually ignored the reader of feminist SF. I hope to contribute to the critical literature of feminist SF by investigating how and why a market and readership of feminist SF has developed. My decision to investigate *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite*, then, is partly based on their success in the marketplace. Both these texts have found a significant readership and, in some sense, each has contributed to the development of the feminist SF readership. A focus on marginal texts would have made an ethnographic analysis of their readership very difficult. My choice is also partly influenced by a desire to study texts from two different eras in the development of feminist SF. Realistically, the availability and recognition of the older books are needed to conduct an analysis of its readers. *Mists* is one of the few feminist fantasy novels which remains in print after fourteen years and is still widely read.

In terms of the readership, I chose an ethnographic research methodology which offers insight into the motivations and experiences of participants rather than a methodology which generates purely statistical data. I conducted two

¹ The work of Henry Jenkins is especially relevant here. His work *Textual Poachers* (1992) addresses issues of fandom and the appropriation of popular culture texts and his most recent book, *Science Fiction Audiences* (1995) is a collaboration with James Tulloch and explores science fiction fandom in the context of *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who*. Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith have also investigated the phenomenon of women *Star Trek* fans in their article "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and *Star Trek* Zines" (1986).

focus groups (one for each book) and also posted a series of questions about the books on the internet to solicit responses from feminist SF readers. My methodological approach is explained more fully at the beginning of chapter five, and is detailed in Appendix A of this thesis.

The body of this thesis is presented in five chapters. The first chapter examines the various theoretical debates which inform my approach to the study of feminist SF. Beginning with a discussion of cultural theories which inform my theoretical and methodological position with regard to the text, I then present the principal works and debates which have contributed to the growing body of feminist SF criticism. Within this literature, various attempts to conflate postmodernism and feminist SF have become manifest and have aroused considerable debate. These debates will be presented in the literature review as an introduction to a more comprehensive analysis of feminist SF and postmodernism in chapter four. Finally, cultural studies research addressing the woman reader, the 'feminine' genre and science fiction audiences is critically examined in light of the project to be undertaken here.

Chapter two attempts to situate the phenomenon of feminist SF within a historical context. Many feminist critics have sought to reclaim a tradition of women's writing and much the same has been undertaken with regard to feminist SF. This chapter examines the context in which women writers

penetrated the male dominated field of SF as well as the conditions which finally allowed for the articulation of feminist ideas within the genre. I will investigate the ways in which feminists have appropriated this genre for their own purposes, what those purposes are and how they relate to broader social discourses.

In chapter three, I undertake an analysis of the complex processes which govern the production of feminist SF: including its publication, marketing, distribution, reviewing and sales. *Mists* and *Ammonite* will serve as a focus for this analysis. These novels were published a decade apart by Del Rey Books, a subsidiary of Ballantine Books, and my analysis of the institutions of production will include an in-depth look at this publishing house and the conditions surrounding the publication of these texts. Aside from academic and trade sources, my research for this chapter and others includes personal interviews with Ellen Key Harris, the editor at Del Rey Books who acquired and edited *Ammonite*, with Patricia Caven, co-owner of Ottawa's speculative fiction bookstore, as well as with Nicola Griffith, author of *Ammonite* (please see Appendices C, D and E for interview questions).

Chapter four presents my own readings of *Mists* and *Ammonite* as resistance to patriarchy framed within the popular debate around feminist SF and postmodernism. While I contest the argument that feminist SF is

postmodern, the debate is a useful one in which to examine the diverse strategies used by feminist writers in undermining patriarchy. This chapter also investigates the level of political engagement intended by the authors of these texts in relation to the discourses of the readers and producers.

Finally, chapter five examines the feminist SF readership. I am indebted to Janice Radway and her research on romance readers for the framework of this chapter. My own findings about feminist SF readers are presented in contrast to Radway's picture of romance readers and studies of the 'feminine' genre. This chapter is dedicated to understanding the meanings generated by the readers of feminist SF in the context of their own experiences and in relation to various other discourses outside the text. I have sought to demonstrate the complex relationship these readers have with feminist discourses and the variety of meanings they construct in relation to *Mists* and *Ammonite* in the context of their own lives.

Literature Review

In this chapter, I will outline the main theoretical debates which influence my thesis. First, I will present a brief summary of the literature which supports my theoretical and methodological approach to the study of feminist SF, mainly an integration of sociology and literary criticism. Once my theoretical groundwork is made clear, I will turn to the growing body of literature specifically concerned with feminist SF. I will examine the principal contributors to this new tradition, as well as the main debates and themes manifest therein. More specifically, three distinct areas of this literature will be examined: the status of science fiction as a genre and the status of women within it; the emerging consensus that science fiction is a subversive genre and should be appropriated to advance the feminist political project; and the emerging theoretical debate over the relationship between feminism, postmodernism and science fiction.

Reader-response theory or audience studies will make up the last part of this literature review. Although much work has been done in this area in recent years, this review will concentrate on those studies pertinent to this analysis of a feminist SF readership - mainly studies of women readers and those few relating to the science fiction audience.

Texts and Contexts

Much of the work accomplished in feminist literary criticism and, as will become evident, in the more recent studies in feminist SF, centralize the text as the object of analysis. Various projects of feminist literary criticism, including feminist re-readings of male texts, analyses of the portrayal of women characters in literature, assessments of the subversive potential of texts written by women and the rediscovery of a female writing tradition, have been echoed in the smaller circle of scholars concerned with feminist SF. While I would concur that the *text* - especially the speculative fiction text - is a subversive tool for feminists and a crucial factor in this analysis, I am arguing here for a more complete investigation of the context of production and of reception in addition to the text itself.

In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1984), Janice Radway argues that mass culture studies have focused predominantly on the ideological functions of the text, ignoring any potential for resistance to that ideological message (Radway, 1984: 6). Romance novels, not surprisingly, have been a particular target for this type of ideological analysis because their content usually explicitly encourages the maintenance and acceptance of the patriarchal order.

As such, Radway sets out to discover the reasons women read romance novels. She makes the object of her study the readers and, more specifically, the *act of reading*: "...the analytic focus must shift from the text itself to the complex social event of reading where a woman actively attributes sense to lexical signs in a silent process carried on in the context of her ordinary life" (Radway, 1984: 10). She concludes that while the texts of these novels embody a "simple recapitulation and recommendation of patriarchy" (Radway, 1984: 210), the act of reading is oppositional because it allows women to resist their designated social role as caretakers and claim time for themselves.

Although the genre in her study is evidently quite different from feminist SF, in many ways Radway's project is very similar to the investigation I am undertaking here. She begins with an analysis of the complex material and social conditions of publication, involving writers, editors, literary agents and distributors, and proceeds to an ethnographic study of a group of women readers in Smithton. Despite her emphasis on the social conditions of production and reception, Radway does not dismiss the text entirely. Her approach to the textual analysis, however, diverges from the one which I will take in my own project. Although I will be framing my research within the methodological approach used by Radway, her theoretical conclusions about reception will not be applied in my own study.

Radway “abhors when theorists select texts as ‘representative’” (Radway, 1984: 13) of the genre and instead asked her ‘Smithton’ readers to distinguish their own preferred texts among romances. I would suggest that the consistent structure of the romance novel, a structure outlined in detail by Radway herself, greatly facilitated the task of selection for the Smithton readers and Radway’s deconstruction of these texts. Feminist SF, on the other hand, is a very diverse genre, ranging from sword-and-sorcery to separatist utopias. As such, requests for the readers to select their favourite texts among such a diverse collection would be unlikely to solicit common responses. As I have made clear in the introduction to this thesis, I am not suggesting that the novels I have selected for study are representative of the genre, for indeed they are not at all.

Radway’s study is most relevant to my own investigation because it serves as a model of analysis where the complexity of the book market and the response of readers are considered with the same seriousness as the textual critique. In her essay “Romantic Readers,” Helen Taylor outlines the assumption about the process of reading evident in Radway’s approach:

...the process of reading itself is not an abstraction between a fixed book and a generalised universal reader, rather it is an exchange, a relationship between an active, critical reader, with all her educational, social and cultural baggage of experience, and a text, with all its literary, historical and cultural references, not to mention the ways it has been produced, packaged and marketed. (Taylor, 1989: 66).

Similarly, Christine Gledhill's concept of 'cultural negotiation' problematizes the deterministic assumption of a fixed or ideological meaning present in a cultural text. She argues that the meaning of cultural texts arises not from the simple production of these texts, but from a process of negotiation between the producers, the texts and the audiences (Gledhill, 1988: 68).

In her conclusion, Radway admits that romance novels ultimately reconcile women to patriarchy and that the resistance or protest inherent in the act of reading them does not spur readers to challenge the established order (Radway, 1984: 217). In this sense, then, neither Radway nor I can completely dismiss the text as insignificant. Will the feminist SF text - a text many argue is intrinsically seditious - succeed in inciting its readers to action where the romance novel failed? Yvonne Tasker would not think so. She argues that the text, in itself, cannot be radical.

In her essay "Having it all: feminism and the pleasures of the popular," Tasker addresses the complicated problem of feminism's conception of the subversive text:

Retained as a tantalizing illusion, an imaginary construct always beyond reach, the 'progressive text' or the transgressive moment, with its proffered possibility of positioning the audience in new and radical ways, inevitably returns us once more to the controlling power of the text. Yet to abandon the progressive, to move from a notion of ideological work to semiotic plays, has also implied the abandonment of evaluation which, wit. in feminist criticism, has been crucial to the establishment of a cultural politics. (Tasker, 1991: 90).

Two diverging trends, argues Tasker, have magnified the problematic relationship feminism has identified between the text and cultural politics. The first is a move away from the "notion of fixed textual meanings" and the second, is precisely a search for "fixed radical ('progressive') meaning within specific texts..." (Tasker, 1991: 92). According to Tasker, the importance feminists assign to the subversive or progressive text privileges some texts over others and questions the ability of readers to 'read' texts 'properly' (in other words, like feminist scholars).

Because her primary concern is the 'feminine' soap-opera, Tasker concludes that the assignment of 'radicalism' to a text is based on an assessment of its 'femininity' or 'openness'; on categories created and decided by feminist critics. She ultimately concludes, then, that "all texts are marked with contradiction" and that those chosen by feminists for special attention "only have the appearance of something radical" (Tasker, 1991: 96). In that case, how do feminist SF texts differ from the 'gendered genres' discussed in Tasker's essay? Where does this leave feminist SF, a genre which - as indicated by the inclusion of 'feminist' in its very name - is seen as encompassing a collection of radical texts? I would argue that feminist SF opens up new possibilities for suppressed voices and provides a space where those voices can be heard and read by others. The very speculative nature of the genre allows women to

liberate themselves from the confines of the known world. However, texts cannot be assessed in isolation. Janet Wolff's writing will now serve to place my conception of the feminist SF text within the larger sphere of this project.

Like Tasker, Wolff questions the almost exclusive focus on the text in much feminist literary criticism and the assumption that the "identification of politically correct features of a work guarantees its effectivity" (Wolff, 1990: 5). Although she admits that the critical reading of texts was a crucial first step in feminist literary criticism, Wolff urges a "fully interdisciplinary sociology of literature approach" (Wolff, 1990: 106) which would consider both institutions and texts. I have extended Wolff's argument to apply to popular fiction as well as 'literature.'

The role she assigns to the text seems at times to be secondary to the material conditions in which it is created and understood, as is evident when she states that there is "nothing inherently feminist in writing" (Wolff, 1990: 9) and that we cannot insist on a 'correct' textual practice for feminism. Although this suggests that she, like Tasker, is dismissing the subversive potential of texts (including my own judgment of feminist SF as a subversive genre), Wolff's argument more precisely insists that the political value of texts cannot be determined without examining their context of reception. This point, I think, has been well demonstrated by Radway's analysis of romance readers.

Nevertheless, Wolff's materialist approach does not completely dismiss the potential inherent in some texts. She writes:

...it seems reasonable to suppose that new forms of cultural expression, by virtue of the fact that their very existence challenges and dislocates dominant narratives and discourses, provide the space for different voices to speak and for hitherto silenced subjects to articulate their experience. (Wolff, 1990: 9).

There is, then, an acknowledgment of the subversive potential of some texts.

Wolff also criticizes sociology of literature studies as focusing on the institutions of publishing and social processes to the exclusion of the *nature* of the texts in question (her emphasis, Wolff, 1990: 109).

She praises feminist sociologists, however, for their recent work on the exclusionary effects of literary institutions and states that this work complements the textual critique studies of literary criticism. For example, the work of Joanna Russ (1983) outlines the different ways in which the institutionalized study of literature suppresses and devalues women's writing and, more recently, Patricia Dunker (1992) exposes the sexist practices of the publishing industry. After all, in addition to the exclusion of women's texts from the canon of 'great' literature, women writers must also contend with institutions of production which may refuse to publish their work at all. These studies will inform my own analysis of the publishing practices involved in the production, marketing and distribution of *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite*. Under what conditions were these two

feminist novels published? How do historical and social factors influence the possibility of publication for seditious texts?

In essence, Wolff advocates a truly interdisciplinary approach rather than the current trend of isolationism which produces complementary work, but not a cohesive study of literature at the level of the text as well as at the level of the institutions and social processes. My investigation of feminist SF is an attempt to produce just such a comprehensive picture of the relationship between feminist SF and cultural politics.

Including the institutions of production and reception in an analysis of science fiction is especially appropriate given the historically close relationship between producers and readers of the genre. As described by Linda Fleming, much of the early development of science fiction was marked by a high degree of interaction between writers and fans; so much so, that many readers became the writers of the next generation (Fleming, 1977: 264). Although not from a feminist standpoint, Darko Suvin advocates a 'paraliterary criticism' approach to the study of science fiction which, much like Wolff's notion, involves a closer investigation of the social conditions of production and reception. Again, the text is seen as important only within a given historical and social context: "Outside of a context that supplies the conditions of making sense, no text can be even read... Only the insertion of a text into a context makes it

intelligible" (Suvin, 1988: 62). In other words, feminist SF can only be considered subversive in relation to other texts and to the social conditions in which it is read. In this way, it is possible that a text such as *Ammonite* would no longer be considered radical in twenty years because the concepts it explores would no longer be disruptive to mainstream ideology. It being understood that the political nature of a text can only be defined in relation to its social and historical context, I would argue, nonetheless, that speculative fiction is a genre with more subversive *potential* than mainstream fiction. A potential, Suvin indicates, which is sometimes undermined by the economic forces of the publishing industry.

Suvin stresses the contradiction between the commercial nature of science fiction as a popular culture product and its undeniably subversive characteristic of cognitive estrangement.' He writes: "...I still remain impenitently committed to seeing SF as a potentially cognitive genre, often hindered from realizing its potentialities by analysable forces in a complex but [hu]manmade history" (Suvin, 1988: xiv). In this sense, I hope my investigation of the conditions of feminist SF's production will determine whether the science fiction publishing industry has suppressed or contributed to the subgenre's development.

As presented here, this collection of works provides ample support for the theoretical and methodological approach I intend to take in this project.

Although it has been made clear that the text cannot be considered radical outside the context of its production and reception, I contend that speculative fiction is more likely than mainstream fiction to articulate resistance to the social conditions in which it is produced. As the next section of this review will demonstrate, this argument dominates much of the literature on feminist SF. However, these scholars concentrate primarily on the textual nature of the genre while failing to investigate fully the contexts of its production and reception.

Feminist Speculative Fiction

I will begin this review of the work on feminist SF with a brief overview of the status of the genre and of women within it. This concern with women writers and the ghettoization of the science fiction genre represents the extent to which most feminist SF critics examine the institutions of production and historical context in their work.

Speculative Fiction and Women

The American science fiction tradition grew up out of a fanatical devotion to technology explored and glorified in the early pulp magazines of the 1940s and 1950s. Despite more recent acknowledgments of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) as the progenitor of the genre, as well as research reclaiming a feminist utopian tradition, the 'golden age' or the pulp magazine age of science fiction was dominated by male writers and young

male readers. Although some women writers (not necessarily feminist writers) penetrated the field during this period by using masculine or neutral pen names,¹ it was not until the 1960s that women were visibly contributing to the field in larger numbers. In her book *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (1988), Sarah Lefanu describes the status of women in the genre during the early years:

Previous to the intervention by feminist writers in the late sixties and early seventies science fiction reflected, in its content at least, what could be called masculine concerns, based around the central theme of space exploration and the development of technology: masculine concerns because access to these areas was effectively denied to women in the real world...(Lefanu, 1988: 3).

Early American science fiction, then, was almost exclusively an all boy's club.²

However, Lefanu suggests that this lack of female characters and concerns did not automatically preclude a female readership (Lefanu, 1988: 2). Robin Roberts corroborates this argument when she remarks that many early feminist SF writers - Ursula LeGuin, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Joan D. Vinge, among

¹ For example, James Tiptree's "The Women Men Don't See" (1975) was praised by Robert Silverberg as a 'profoundly feminist story told in entirely masculine manner'. It was later discovered that James Tiptree Jr. was really Alice Sheldon (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 29). Although her gender is now well known, Catherine Moore adopted C.L. Moore as a pseudonym in her early days writing science fiction and still publishes under that name. Likewise, Alice Mary Norton chose to publish as Andre Norton in the science fiction market of the 1950s. Marion Zimmer Bradley, however, does not ascribe to the view that women were invisible in science fiction before the 1970s and that many women were forced to use male pseudonyms to get published. She says: "Women made much of the fact that Alice Mary Norton became Andre Norton, Catherine L. Moore used the initials C.L. and Leigh Brackett and I both had gender-irrelevant names." (Bradley, 1988: 84). She argues that C.L. Moore, Andre Norton and herself were not trying to conceal their gender by choosing pen names (Bradley, 1988: 89).

² This is true to the point that the Boys' Clubs of America Award was given to science fiction or fantasy writers. Ironically, it was awarded to a woman writer, Andre Norton, in 1965.

others - were introduced to the genre through the early pulp magazines and that they appropriated the misogynistic images of powerful women in those stories and pictures for feminist purposes (Roberts, 1990: 45).

While many scholars agree that women, however marginalized, played their part as writers and readers in the development of science fiction, there is a concern that many conservative members of the science fiction community (mostly men) have disregarded or devalued the important contributions of women writers in the 1970s. For example, Bruce Sterling describes the science fiction of the 1970s as "unreadably dull" (in Sargent, 1995: 4). Furthermore, definitions of the genre as a means of extrapolating on the impact of science and technology (Isaac Asimov) and calls for strict scientific realism have led to accusations that "...feminist science fiction isn't real science fiction but is political polemic disguised as science fiction..." (Lefanu, 1991: 179). These assertions on the part of men that women are lowering the standards of science fiction,³ can be tempered with Le Guin's (1979) argument that women can be considered as having a civilizing influence on the genre by raising the concern for quality.

³ For example, Robin Roberts suggests that many feminist science fiction writers reject 'hard' science fiction (stories based on known scientific facts) almost completely and explore instead the 'soft' social sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology) or an imaginary science which she calls 'psionics' (telepathy, teleportation). "Many hardcore science fiction writers, critics and readers, see soft science fiction as weakening the field" (Roberts, 1993: 5). According to Roberts, this trend toward 'soft' sciences in women's science fiction is due in large part to the realistic fact that women were traditionally excluded from the male domain of science.

The very fact of writing within the science fiction *genre* also poses considerable problems for women writers. Lucie Armitt is one of the few feminist SF scholars concerned with the effect of the contemporary publishing industry on feminist SF. Her emphasis on the “tension between the book as a saleable commodity and the creativity of the author” recalls Darko Suvin’s comment on the contradiction inherent in science fiction. Indeed the power of the publisher to choose the cover of the book - often lurid or gaudy according to Armitt - and to determine marketing strategies can significantly hinder efforts to promote subversive texts to the general reader. Even the ‘science fiction’ label evokes in potential readers an idea of what to expect from the book and a vision of its intended audience (Armitt, 1991: 8). Unfortunately, science fiction still retains “a marginality - a certain geekiness - that not all women find comfortable” (Phillips, 1994: 71). Thus, in spite of the potential in feminist science fiction for cultural intervention, many readers may dismiss the genre because of the label attached to it by the industry.

Armitt argues that women writers have always been relegated to those forms of literature seen as low/popular cultural forms:

One cannot help but consider that throughout the history of literature and publishing, those forms which have conventionally been ‘open’ to women are those generally judged to be ‘popular’ (that is non-prestigious or ‘low-brow’): the romance, the detective story, and of course writing for children. (Armitt, 1991: 5).

Science fiction has also been classified as part of a "submerged or plebeian lower literature" (in Pearson, 1990: 8). The contradiction inherent in this argument, however, can not be ignored. If women are usually relegated to lower literary genres and SF is traditionally considered by SF scholars to be of inferior literary standing, why have women been excluded from the SF circle until recent years? I would argue, like Lefanu, that women have long been excluded from the larger realms of scientific education and research and hence, were not considered as serious contributors to a genre premised on scientific extrapolation. As will be demonstrated in the historical overview of feminist SF in chapter two, however, women writers and readers were present, if somewhat invisible in the early days of science fiction.

Although some works of SF are gaining respect in literary circles, there is an assumption that "science fiction is composed of classics plus a wide-ranging morass of lesser quality work" (Moody, 1991: 186). As such, aside from the few works deemed worthy of critical notice, science fiction remains delegated to the literary ghetto. This ghettoization can be exacerbated for women SF writers. Josephine Saxton, a prominent feminist SF writer, complains that the science fiction label was the "kiss of death" (Saxton, 1991: 215). First, by being a woman writer and secondly, by the classification of her work as science fiction, she asserts: "I had the ghetto mark tattooed on my soul" (Saxton, 1991: 209). The

ghettoizing qualities of the genre raise certain questions for feminist SF writers.

What texts are published as speculative fiction? Does classification as a speculative fiction writer limit the market reach of the text? Is speculative fiction considered a respectable literary form for feminist cultural intervention? By whom?

While many feminist scholars have shown an interest in contextualizing the feminist contribution to science fiction within the larger history of the genre and within the context of feminist writing, as well as investigating the problems of women writers, few have given their attention to the women readers of feminist SF, except to say that they have no doubt increased in number. Writing in 1972, Joanna Russ - one of the first women scholars to study science fiction - briefly mentions the readers of the genre, if not the context in which they interpret the text. She states that most of the readers of science fiction at that time were male and under twenty years old. She also estimates a 5 to 1 ratio of male to female readers, although she does not seem to have conducted any research to corroborate her guess (Russ, 1972b: 83).

In my survey of the literature, the only systematic study I located on the role of women as writers and readers in science fiction was published by William Bainbridge in 1982. This quantitative, social scientific investigation was part of a larger project surveying the genre undertaken in 1978 at the World Science

Fiction Convention. Bainbridge states that 41.5 per cent of the respondents were women and that the bulk of the evidence indicated that women and men were equally involved in the subculture (Bainbridge, 1982: 1083). These results evidently diverge from Russ's original estimate ten years earlier. In the *Locus* readership survey conducted in 1995, 30 per cent of the 681 respondents were women. (*Locus*, 1995: 56-57). Unfortunately, demographics and interests regarding only the women respondents to this survey or only those interested in feminist SF were unavailable.

In Bainbridge's study, respondents ranked a list of female authors and preferred types of literature, while the researchers compiled data on the number of women writers in each subgenre. Sword-and-sorcery/fantasy was the most preferred subgenre of women readers. I find it surprising that most feminist SF critics concentrate almost exclusively on the 'science fiction' end of the spectrum, given the results of Bainbridge's study and the higher proportion of women writers in the 'fantasy' realm (Attebery, 1987: 11). As demonstrated in my historical analysis, women writers penetrated the realm of fantasy more easily than they did the masculine domain of science fiction. Is fantasy fiction closer to 'feminine' concerns as they are constructed by our culture? Indeed, Nickianne Moody suggests an affinity between the romance and fantasy fiction (Moody, 1991).

Despite the proposed relationship between fantasy and romance, Moody suggests that some fantasy written by women is feminist. While not all fantasy texts can be classified as overtly feminist, Rosemary Jackson presents a case for fantasy as a potentially subversive literature. She argues that fantasy "...characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints; it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (Jackson, 1981: 3). Similarly, Brian Attebery's description of fantasy suggests it as an appropriate mode of cultural intervention for oppressed groups:

But fantasy, growing out of the fundamentally optimistic fairy tale, represents a uniquely positive response to disaffection. The fantasist responds to destructiveness by building, to disorder by imagining order, and to despair by calling forth wonder. (Attebery, 1980: 186).

Charlotte Spivack also suggests that fantasy written by women is consistently more subversive than its male counterparts (Spivack, 1987: 8). Fantasy provides a realm where feminist writers can explore their dreams. In this sense, fantastic literature also has potential for feminism despite the fact that it is often ignored by feminist SF critics. I have specifically selected a fantasy novel for study in this project as an illustration of the various forms in which feminist SF is articulated.

Subversive Speculative Fiction

Three principal trends dominate the discourse of feminist SF as a subversive literary genre. The first mirrors the early work in feminist literary criticism on the 'images of women' in fiction and insists that the portrayal of strong female characters in fiction provides positive role models for female readers. Secondly, many critics argue that the liberty to create new worlds in speculative fiction permits authors to constitute a new subject position for women, or a world in which women are not the alien 'other.' And finally, the recent appropriation of postmodern theory by many feminists has led to an argument in feminist SF criticism that this genre permits women to deconstruct patriarchal meta-narratives, most importantly the binarism which characterizes gender relations.

All these approaches merge, however, in their assertion that speculative fiction is a tool for cultural intervention because of its specific ability to make the familiar seem strange - its 'what if' nature.

The Female Heroine

Just as in feminist literary criticism, much of the early work in the analysis of women in science fiction dealt with the portrayal of women characters in this fiction. In Susan Koppelman Cornillon's *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (1972), Joanna Russ contributes two essays relating to women in

science fiction: "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write" and "The Image of Women in Science Fiction."

Writing before much of her own fictional work - most notably *The Female Man* (1975) - Russ complains that the "speculation about the innate personality differences between men and women, sex and gender roles does not exist [in science fiction]" (Russ, 1972b: 80). Although set in futuristic worlds where space travel and intergalactic wars with alien species abound, most science fiction, argues Russ, simply repositions into these new worlds a conception of the relation between the sexes as it is in present day middle class suburbia. Russ recognizes that there are no women in science fiction, only images of women. And the images of women in science fiction never address the reality that women live everyday. Ursula Le Guin provides a striking picture of the status of women characters in the early days of science fiction:

...science fiction has either totally ignored women, or presented them as squeaking dolls subject to instant rape by monsters, or old-maid scientists desexed by hypertrophy of the intellectual organs, or, at best, loyal little wives or mistresses of accomplished heroes. (Le Guin, 1979: 97).

Since this criticism, many speculative fiction texts have contributed to the portrayal of strong female characters by placing women in roles traditionally occupied by male heroes. The position advocating science fiction as a genre

permitting the portrayal of strong women is articulated here by Anne Cranny-

Francis:

Because of its estrangement from the everyday world of experiential reality, science fiction (and fantasy) can present women in new roles, liberated from the sexism endemic to their society even in its most emancipated state (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 42).

Essentially, then, it is the very nature of SF- the factor of 'cognitive estrangement,' the ability to scrutinize our own reality by presenting an alternative one, which allows women to occupy these new roles. Pamela Sargent also describes this conviction:

Only science fiction and fantasy literature can show us women in entirely new or strange surroundings. It can explore what we might become if and when the present restrictions on our lives vanish, or show us new problems and restrictions that might arise. It can show us remarkable women as normal where past literature shows her as the exception. (Sargent, 1978: 48).

However, the "Amazon" stories (as they are called by Lefanu) reverse the roles of men and women, but do not succeed in challenging gender stereotypes or the masculinist quest narrative which is characteristic of this fiction.⁴ This tactic, according to Lefanu, is not sufficient for intervention in cultural politics: "In literature, it seems to me, an act of revolution can be achieved only through a subversion of the narrative structure that holds the protagonist in place: a gender

⁴ Anne McCaffrey's work is frequently classified as presenting strong female characters without stepping beyond the traditional gender binarism or the quest narrative familiar in this kind of fiction.

reversal is not enough”(Lefanu, 1988: 35). Similarly, Toril Moi reproaches the ‘images of women’ trend in feminist literary criticism for being ‘normative’ in its search for an ‘authentic’ representation of reality and of strong role models for women, as well as for being “excessively naive about the relationship between literature and reality and between author and text...”(Moi, 1985: 49). More recent scholarship has recognized the potential of feminist SF not only to develop strong female characters but to create worlds in which women’s experiences are validated.

New Worlds, New Subjects

Feminist separatist utopias are the most obvious example of texts in which women are no longer seen as the alien ‘other’ in a patriarchal world. Among the texts most discussed in the work of feminist SF critics are Suzy McKee Charnas’s *Motherlines* (1978), Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), the Free Amazons in Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Shattered Chain* (1976) and, more recently, Sheri Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1989). In this project, I will be discussing a more contemporary feminist separatist world, if not exactly a utopia: Nicola Griffith’s *Ammonite* (1992).

In addition to these science fiction texts, much fantasy fiction has reclaimed histories and myths in which women’s experiences are validated and foregrounded. According to Nickianne Moody, many women fantasy writers

choose the matriarchal Celtic setting because it provides "a women's fantasy of freedom and equality which has historical support" (Moody, 1991: 199). In essence, feminist fantasy reclaims a culture which has been suppressed or condemned: a culture concerned with women's experiences. For as Joanna Russ argues: "There is a female culture, but it is an underground, unofficial, minor culture, occupying a small corner of what we think of officially as possible human experience" (Russ, 1972: 4). The fantasy genre, however, is rarely discussed in the same context as feminist science fiction, if mentioned at all. My project here, I hope, will present science fiction and fantasy as equal participants in the subversive goals of speculative fiction.

In her first book *Alien to Femininity* (1987), Marleen Barr contends that three central broad themes are addressed in the work of feminist science fiction writers: heroism, community and sexuality/reproduction (Barr, 1987: xiv). Her book is an extension of this argument, analyzing the content of what she considers the principal works of feminist science fiction in light of these categories. Barr's notion of feminist heroism is one in which heroic qualities are redefined by women writers to stress the relationship between action and knowledge rather than simply external action (Barr, 1987: 61). She also notes that many of the books she is discussing could be categorized as 'womanist,' a term she describes essentially as not separatist. In this sense, Barr advocates

cooperation between male and female heroes, not the elimination of men by virtue of their own destruction, plague or displacement which is so common in feminist SF. While valid, this position depoliticizes feminist SF. Separatist utopias are not intended as realistic alternatives to our own society, but as texts which propose alternative ways of thinking about social relations. In other words, there is a reason why feminist SF writers create separatist worlds in their imagination.

The concept of community in feminist science fiction, for example, is expressed most overtly in feminist separatist utopias where there is, according to Robin Roberts, a "reworking of myths about mothering and the valorization of qualities identified as feminine: community, home and family" (Roberts, 1990: 66). In general, utopian communities in feminist SF are sexually permissive - in the sense that sex is disassociated from notions of ownership, reproduction and social structure - classless, ecologically-minded with a 'quasi-tribal' feeling (Russ, 1995: 139).

Robin Roberts has also demonstrated the underlying theme of mothering present in much feminist SF. She notes the recurrence of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone⁵ in several feminist post-apocalyptic utopias in which, she claims, women revise the myth to demonstrate the power of female anger

⁵ Roberts gives a synopsis of the myth: "Demeter loses her only daughter, Persephone, to the Lord of the Underworld, Hades, who abducts Persephone and carries her off by force. In anger and grief, Demeter refuses to attend to the Earth which turns to a frozen desert." (Roberts, 1993: 101).

and to explore the mother/daughter relationship (Roberts, 1993: 101). Many writers have also addressed the question of childrearing and of gender, a subject hitherto invisible in much science fiction. For example in Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines*, mothering is shared by all members of the group and in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, children in Mattapoissett are born through machines and both men and women raise them as 'mothers.'

As such, the concerns of women are made central, negating the assumption that the women are the alien 'others.' Feminist utopias also make evident the patriarchal structures of this world by presenting alternatives, inviting the reader to position contemporary society against the fantastical, utopian community in the text.

Narratives, as argued by Mary Bray, have traditionally "embodied male perceptions of experience as normative, forcing upon female readers one or more levels of removal" (Bray, 1986: 57). According to Anne Cranny-Francis, one of the principal goals of feminist SF, then, is to create a new reading position for women which assumes the reader is female, not male. Cranny-Francis outlines the different themes used by feminist SF authors to explore and create this new feminist position: science/technology, the alien, estrangement, extrapolation and narrative (Cranny-Francis, 1990). By deconstructing or reshaping each of these

common science fiction conventions, the author forces upon the reader a new feminist perspective in which:

...the reader's own society is profoundly estranged, familiar social practices have new significance, new meaning, and the (ideological) means by which those practices are maintained are revealed as not natural or obvious or commonsense, but socially constructed in accordance with a particular set of discourses (sexist) defining a particular power relationship - men dominant, women dominated. (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 69).

The argument that feminist SF's ability to make the patriarchal constraints of reality visible is articulated in many different ways, by various feminist SF critics. In essence, feminist SF is looked upon by these theorists as an extension of feminist theory, an educational tool which makes these concepts available to a wider audience. However, the actual context of its reception is never examined to determine its effectiveness, nor are the readers of the genre studied in terms of their association with feminism outside the text or in terms of their level of familiarity with the genre.

In her later works, Marleen Barr's main concern turns to the division between feminist theory and feminist SF. She objects to the division between academic theory and popular fiction and champions a new term, 'feminist fabulation,' which would include feminist SF and other feminist fictions, as well as some academic texts. However, her assertion that feminist SF "...remains virtually invisible to the academic community" (Barr, 1993: 101), has been refuted

by the abundance of work I have reviewed here and that she has herself contributed to. Furthermore, Jacqueline Pearson argues that feminist theory has often been written in forms analogous to speculative fiction (Pearson, 1990: 8) and many SF writers also contribute to feminist theory.⁶ Nonetheless, Barr believes the isolation of feminist SF within the science fiction genre is fatal and wants to remove feminist SF from science fiction altogether, to reposition it within her broader category of feminist fabulation. Even if her will alone made this recategorization possible, I would argue that the conception of a new, encompassing classification does not alter the effectiveness or role of feminist SF as a tool in cultural politics.

Despite my skepticism of her proposed category, Barr was one of the first feminist SF scholars to suggest the union of feminist SF and postmodernism. She defines her notion of feminist fabulation as texts which "...unmask the fictionality of patriarchal master narratives, rewrite patriarchal tales..." (Barr, 1993: 105). Indeed, the theoretical debate positing an alignment of feminism and

⁶ For example, Joanna Russ, as demonstrated here, has contributed significantly to feminist literary criticism with a special concern for science fiction. However, her book *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983) and several essays in *To Write Like a Woman* (1995) show her wider interest in feminist concerns. Of course, she has also written several science fiction novels, of which *The Female Man* (1975) is the most famous. Suzette Haden Elgin, a linguistics professor, has also contributed to both feminist theory and feminist SF. In her science fiction novel *Native Tongue* (1984), Elgin posits the invention of language for women called Laadan and later expands on this concept in *A First Dictionary and Grammar of Laadan* (1985). Monique Wittig's *Les guerillères* (1969), a radical feminist separatist novel in which women are at war with men, is also often discussed in feminist literary criticism (see Moi, 1985: 79). In her book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), Donna Haraway devotes the entire last chapter to a discussion of Octavia Butler's science fiction novel *Dawn* (1987) to illustrate her concept of the cyborg as suitable for feminist appropriation.

postmodernism has engaged many feminists in recent years. Claims that science fiction and postmodernism are also connected in some sense has made this debate doubly pertinent for feminist SF critics.

Feminism, Postmodernism and Speculative Fiction

As defined by Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, postmodernism entails "...a rejection of the grand projects of the rationalist Enlightenment" (Barrett & Phillips, 1992: 206) including both reductionist Marxism and liberal theoretical approaches, as well as the humanist subject. Jean-François Lyotard conceives of postmodernism as a condition of Western civilization in which legitimating 'metanarratives' are no longer valid (in Fraser & Nicholson, 1990: 22). According to Fraser and Nicholson, many feminists have also engaged in a process of exposing the sexist meta-narratives of patriarchy: the assumptions of female dependence and confinement to the domestic sphere (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990: 33).

In this way, feminist SF deconstructs patriarchal meta-narratives by rendering them visible through estrangement. Although it could be argued that any text could accomplish this task, Veronica Hollinger posits that realist literature is "...ultimately incapable of envisioning new responses in the face of patriarchal things-as-they-are" (Hollinger: 1993: 273). Robin Roberts supports an alliance of feminist SF and postmodernism: "Indeed one could argue that since

realism is by definition grounded in the actual, patriarchal world, *only* SF, with its embrace of fantasizing and the impossible, can fully sustain a vision of the future" (Roberts, 1990: 137). Feminist SF, then, allows women to step *outside* patriarchy and imagine a world in which the oppressive practices of their society do not confine them and alienate them. Yet these writers must also work within a narrative which encodes patriarchal discourse in its very structure. As explained by Anne Cranny-Francis:

A lot of science fiction employs the quest narrative with its familiar conventions of the tough male hero and helpless, passive female victim/prize; so that a masculinist gender ideology is encoded in the text before the writer even begins telling the story. (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 69)

Similarly, Patricia Monk suggests that the quest plot of traditional science fiction does not require the presence of women and has thus made it easy and almost inevitable to exclude women (Monk, 1980: 17). How are feminist SF writers to deal with the contradiction of writing within a masculinist narrative?

Cranny-Francis advises feminist authors to use a textual construction and contextualization of the quest narrative which "reveals its hidden (patriarchal) discursive content" to obviate the problem of using a "masculinist story-telling mechanism to tell a feminist story" (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 69). Whether this new way of structuring narrative is akin to postmodern narrative styles, Cranny-Francis does not say. Some feminist SF authors, however, have harnessed

postmodern strategies to escape the traditional quest narrative of science fiction. Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985), for example, makes use of pastiche and nonlinear narrative. It incorporates text, poems, tables, scientific drawings and an accompanying audio tape (Roberts, 1990: 148). Others have remained within the confines of the narrative, but have deconstructed patriarchal meta-narratives in the text. *The Mists of Avalon* will serve as an example of this trend in later discussion. Of course, this reference to postmodern and traditional realist approaches to undermining patriarchy only serves as a framework in this analysis. There are certainly numerous ways in which feminist writers blend politics and literature in a way suitable to their style.

Although postmodernism and the various groups within feminism (lesbians, women of colour, poor women) have rightfully led feminists to recognize their own legitimating discourse of 'woman' as an all-inclusive category, the completely pluralistic notion of the subject has led some feminists to question the validity of a seemingly apolitical stance associated with postmodernism. As the ultimate goals of feminism are to promote real social change, it is essential for feminists to hold on to the notion that human beings can act upon the world, while acknowledging a diversity in the forms of oppression women may be experiencing. Patricia Waugh argues that feminists

are reluctant to give up the notion of a centered subject because they have not yet experienced it:

As male writers lament its demise, women writers have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world. (Waugh, 1989: 6).

Similarly, Christine Di Stefano argues that postmodernism's emphasis on the fragmented subject and its celebration of multiple subjects can no longer accommodate the concept of a unified, politically active category of 'women' who share essentially the same oppression (Di Stefano: 1990: 75). Thus, the project of feminism is bound up with the Enlightenment notion of the subject and a postmodern stance essentially undermines the legitimacy of a struggle for materialist intervention. However much we would like to de-center the subject and bring the struggle of women on the plane of discursive construction, we must never forget that women suffer oppression through material circumstances.

Although feminism and postmodernism may never reconcile these contradictions, Jenny Wolmark suggests that "the intersection between them can best be characterized as a shared theoretical moment" (Wolmark: 1994: 20). In the same vein, Fraser and Nicholson advise feminists to take the best of both worlds, a postmodern concern for diversity and historicity, along with an acceptance of large theoretical tools to address political problems (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990: 34). In terms of SF, Robin Roberts argues that many feminist SF

authors have adopted post-structuralist⁷ tools in their work. Hence despite the many contradictions inherent in a communion of postmodernism and feminism, "...feminist science fiction writers show that the ideas of postmodernism can be used for political ends" (Roberts, 1993: 139).

While Roberts presents a strong argument for feminist SF as a postmodern genre, I will concentrate, rather, on interpreting this current feminist debate in relation to the content and form of the two texts under scrutiny. Feminist SF, like most fiction, contains too many diverse texts to be labeled strictly within one theoretical framework or another; there are many feminisms and, as argued by Hollinger, many versions of SF feminisms (Hollinger, 1990: 233). Some SF texts, then, necessarily manifest more postmodern elements than others, and some, like *Ammonite*, remain within a modernist framework. The textual analysis presented in this project will examine the implications of these approaches.

Whether considering the subversive nature of science fiction through the portrayal of strong women characters, the creation of new feminist subject positions, the exploration of gynocentric worlds or the use of postmodern tools to deconstruct patriarchal metanarratives, the majority of feminist SF critics have concentrated on the text as the object of analysis. They deconstruct the content

⁷ Roberts posits a complementary relationship between postmodernism and poststructuralism where "post-structuralism refers to a set of theories...that look at discourse not for deep structures, but rather for contradiction, paradox, multivocality. Postmodernism describes a culture including artifacts...that can be interpreted through post-structuralist theories" (Roberts, 1990: 137).

of the principal works of feminist SF to find the radical meaning within them.

They argue, essentially, that the *text* in itself is subversive. As demonstrated in the first part of this review, however, the text cannot be considered radical outside the context in which it is interpreted.

Reader-Response Theories and Audience Studies

In this review, I have consistently charged feminist SF critics with glorifying the text and neglecting the readers. As evident in the work of Anne Cranny-Francis and Robin Roberts, however, this criticism is not entirely merited. Feminist SF critics have considered the reader - theoretically. In other words, they have considered an abstract 'reader', an invisible audience. Thus, my allegation stems not from a theoretical standpoint, but from my concern with the actual social and material context in which feminist SF is read and interpreted. I will turn to the words of Ien Ang to strengthen my plea for an ethnographic approach to feminist SF:

Ethnographic work, in the sense of drawing on what we can perceive and experience in everyday settings, acquires its critical mark when it functions as a reminder that reality is always more complicated and diversified than our theories can represent...(Ang, 1990: 110).

Reader-Response Theory

Anne Cranny-Francis's argument that feminist SF creates a new feminist reading position, for example, arises out of the reader-response criticism

described by Patrocinio Schweickart in "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading" (1986). Schweickart endorses Judith Fetterley's view that women become 'immasculated'⁸ by men; that through literature, they are taught to think like men and to assign the universal to men, always casting themselves in the position of the other:

Androcentric literature is all the more efficient as an instrument of sexual politics because it does not allow the woman reader to seek refuge in her difference... It solicits her complicity in the elevation of male difference into universality and, accordingly, the denigration of female difference into otherness without reciprocity. (Schweickart, 1986: 42).

Kate Millet and Judith Fetterley have worked within this framework of the 'resisting reader' (Schweickart, 1986: 42). Robin Roberts adopts a similar viewpoint in her analysis of women reading early pulp science fiction magazines. She states: "This complex reconfiguration of misogynist sources and the reclamation of their images of women shows the sophisticated ways in which feminist theorists can read and reread texts" (Roberts, 1993: 47). What of women readers who are not 'feminist theorists'? How do they read these texts? Anne Cranny-Francis also assumes a feminist readership when she argues that the goal of feminist SF is to create a new feminist subject position. She distinguishes

⁸ This term was coined by Judith Fetterley to explain why women read texts differently than men. She states:

...the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the *immascultation* of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principle is misogyny" (Fetterley, 1978: xx).

between a *reading* position - "...the position assumed by a reader from which the text seems to be coherent," - and a *subject* position constructed by discourse outside the text (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 25). The feminist reading position and subject position become one when the only comfortable way of understanding the feminist science fiction text is from a feminist subject position. The assumptions inherent in this argument will be addressed more directly in my analysis of the feminist SF readers.

Elaine Showalter argues that there is a shift from a 'feminist critique,' or concern with the woman as reader, to a new mode of feminist criticism, 'gynocritics' which emphasizes the woman as writer (Showalter, 1981: 182). Indeed, we have seen within feminist SF criticism an overwhelming concern for the various themes and styles explored by feminist writers and for the historical position of the woman writer (not necessarily feminist) within the genre. They have admitted with cheerful hearts that the number of women and feminist science fiction writers has increased in recent years. Thus, with the growing number of feminist SF books on the market, we must assume a considerable readership for this emerging subgenre. And yet, the burgeoning readership of feminist SF is still invisible, unidentified. Not even the publishers have brought themselves to explore this group thoroughly. When discussing the books published by Virago, Dale Spender notes "...the failure of mainstream

publishers... to produce studies which chart the creation, character and current concerns of this group and the changes it has wrought..." (Spender, 1989: 50).

This project is partly an effort to remedy this situation.

As corroborated in my earlier discussion of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*, cultural studies literature has also concentrated on the characteristics of women's genres, supporting the argument that women prefer the 'feminine' genres such as romances and soap-operas because of the cultural ideology of femininity and the readings that such relations invite (Fiske, 1987; Radway, 1984). For example, E. Ann Kaplan argues that the appeal of the soap-opera genre is based on traditional feminine competencies associated with the responsibility for managing the sphere of personal life (Kaplan, 1992: 250). Does feminist SF undermine the cultural ideology of femininity? Would feminist SF be classified as a 'feminine' genre by these scholars given its undermining of patriarchal structures? Do the pleasures of feminist SF readers correspond to those expressed in these studies?

SF Audience Studies

Cultural studies research has also been the site of an emerging concern with the science fiction audience. The propensity this genre seems to have for evoking devotion in readers and viewers, as well as the high visibility of these fans, have inspired scholars to investigate the phenomenon of 'fandom' in more

detail. Most notable among these scholars are Henry Jenkins and John Tulloch, who in their most recent collaboration, *Science Fiction Audiences* (1995), examine the subcultures of *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* audiences respectively.

Although mostly concerned with television, this work reveals interesting findings about women science fiction fans. Related once again to reader-response theory and the ways in which women gain pleasure from popular culture, Jenkins's research on female *Star Trek* fans and 'slash fanzines' demonstrates the extent to which women can reconceptualize cultural texts which reflect the interests of the dominant male culture to suit their own purposes. Jenkins's extensive research and participation in the *Star Trek* fandom community reveals that throughout the history of the television series, women made up the majority of *Star Trek* fans and began circulating fan-writing among themselves which extrapolated on the original program and modified it to suit their own interests (Jenkins, 1995: 11).

The main subject ... these 'slash zines' is the development of a romantic relationship between the two protagonists from the *Star Trek* series: Captain Kirk and Spock. As explained by Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith, "K/S [Kirk/Spock] stories remove gender as a governing and determining force in the love relationship...and provide a vision of a new way of loving and especially a vision of new possibilities for women" (Lamb & Veith, 1986: 254). They contend

that these stories are not about homosexuality or gender, but are an expression of the desire for truly egalitarian relationships. Thus by going beyond the narrative presented, and circumventing the author, women have appropriated this science fiction text for their own pleasure. Admittedly, the extent to which these women engage the text differs from the media consumption experience of the majority of the population (Jenkins, 1992: 286). If feminist SF is indeed a subversive genre which requires a feminist reading position, the strategies adopted by its readers would necessarily differ significantly from those faced with a patriarchal text. Nonetheless, there *is* a feminist SF fandom community as is evident by the existence of WISCON (a convention on feminist science fiction held in Wisconsin annually) and the creation of the Tiptree Award⁹ which was funded in large part by selling cookbooks and bake sales (Sargent, 1995: 1). I hope my own ethnographic analysis of feminist SF readers will reveal their level of involvement in this community (or a more local one) or their perception of this literature's role in their lives.

Unfortunately, there has been limited academic research on the fans of literary SF, and even less on the readers of feminist SF. I hope to contribute to the literature of feminist SF by providing an analysis of the as yet mysterious readership and fans of the subgenre. Although I am not proposing to offer a

⁹ The Tiptree Award has been given annually since 1991 to authors who deal imaginatively with gender roles and succeed in "freeing the reader, at least temporarily, from the social and sexual assumptions of our culture" (Sargent, 1995: 1).

study which could be generalized to a broad population base, I hope to discover something about the people who read feminist SF through an ethnographic investigation of a small group of readers in the Ottawa area and of several internet respondents. What do these people like about this subgenre? Why do they read it? Do they feel feminist SF has contributed to various feminist projects? Has the subgenre succeeded in affecting their own perceptions of gender and other patriarchal structures or do they already consider themselves feminists? Is the effectivity of feminist SF reduced in part because it 'preaches to the converted'?

As this project intends to incorporate feminist criticism and sociology, I will conclude this literature review by quoting the words of Patrocinio Schweickart: "...feminist criticism,... is a mode of *praxis*. The point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to *change the world*" (Schweickart, 1986: 39). The process of cultural negotiation, then, is a crucial arena for political struggle. Women, it seems, have recognized this fact long before it was articulated in feminist theoretical discourse. From Virginia Woolf to Ursula Le Guin, women writers have fought against the institutions of patriarchy to make their voices heard. Sometimes, those voices have been muffled and erased by suppression and neglect, but women have gradually retraced a history of their own writing. In the same spirit, the next chapter will

examine the reconstructed tradition of women's SF writing in Western Europe and America from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.

Feminist SF in Historical Perspective

Given my specific concern with the institutional and social contexts in which popular fiction is produced and consumed, I find it fitting to begin this analysis of the feminist SF phenomenon by examining the historical conditions of its development in Anglo-American culture. This ethnological distinction is meaningful because there is certainly a rich history of science fiction literature in other cultures and countries which is beyond the scope of this investigation.¹ My analysis will deal specifically with the Anglo-American tradition in so much as it relates to the region in which I intend to conduct my own ethnographic research (Ottawa).

Much influenced by trends in feminist literary criticism, scholars concerned with feminist SF are only now beginning the task of reclaiming a continuing tradition of women SF writers in a genre conspicuously known for its misogynistic character. Most notable among these projects of establishing a female heritage in science fiction are Robin Roberts's recent book *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction* (1993) and the collaborative effort edited by Jane Donawerth and Carol Kolmerten which traces the feminist utopia back to the seventeenth century, *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*

¹ For example, Darko Suvin has published *Russian Science Fiction 1956-1974: A Bibliography* (1976) and *Other Worlds, Other Seas: Science Fiction Stories from Socialist Countries* (1970). There is also a significant French language science fiction and fantasy tradition in Canada including the work of Élisabeth Vonarburg, a feminist SF writer whose work has been translated into English, Suzanne Martel, Jules-Paul Tardivel, Francine Pelletier and Marie-Claire Blais among others (Government of Canada: 1995).

(1994). Unfortunately, there have been no comparable projects in the realm of fantasy; the recorded history of fantasy, from the fairy tale to modern fantasy, has overwhelmingly focused on stories written by men.

Speculative Fiction Roots

In its origins, fantasy was the dominion of the lower classes, the peasants. Although oral folktales were imaginary in character, based on fanciful magical adventures, they were usually subversive in content. Brian Attebery calls them "disruptive and democratic: the weak overthrow the strong, the old give way to the young and the villager becomes king" (Attebery, 1980: 4). These oral folktales were collected and published by the Grimm brothers in the early nineteenth century and have come to be known as fairy tales, or among folklorists, *Märchen* (Attebery, 1980: 4). Attebery even suggests that women may have played a significant role in the process of conversion to written format: "...it was probably the peasant granny or nanny who most aided those tales in their transformation into written form by exposing children of the upper classes to the splendors of magical adventure" (Attebery, 1980: 5). From its peasant origins, the *Märchen* eventually became a written genre, the literary fairy tale, first explored by the German Romantics, and later by English writers such as John Ruskin, William Morris and C.S. Lewis. The long tradition of fantasy writing and the many forms it has taken through the course of its development can not be explored in detail

here. Brian Attebery's *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* (1980) provides a comprehensive history of the genre from its origins to modern American fantasy.

It was the publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic fantasy adventure, *The Lord of the Rings*, in the 1950s which ultimately created a popular market for modern fantasy and, according to Attebery, seemed to "reshape all definitions of fantasy to fit itself" (Attebery, 1980: 10). Indeed Attebery claims Tolkien's accomplishment has cast its long shadow on all the works of fantasy to follow it and has virtually made the definition of fantasy as a distinct form possible. Women do not figure prominently in the recorded history of American fantasy until the 1960s, when Andre Norton, Anne McCaffrey, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Ursula Le Guin entered the field with their hybrid mix of science fiction and fantasy which is sometimes called 'science fantasy.' Evidently, the line between fantasy and science fiction is very thin, and although they are sometimes accorded separate histories, I contend that they ultimately both arise from this fascination with the unknown and the subversive potential inherent in their earliest form as peasant folktales. Because there has been no research tracing the contribution of women fantasy writers before the 1950s, my historical perspective will necessarily be based upon the work of feminist scholars who have reclaimed the feminist utopian and science fiction traditions.

Pamela Sargent suggests that science fiction derives "from both the utopian literary tradition and pulp adventure fiction" (Sargent, 1995: 3). This dualism, according to Sargent, has been consistently manifest in the American science fiction tradition throughout its history: "There has always been a tension between the more intellectual purposes of the genre (the questioning of our society's assumptions) and what many readers seek in it (escapism that is diverting without being disturbing)" (Sargent, 1995: 3). This perspective assumes that these two streams evident in science fiction are mutually exclusive, when indeed they are not. It also encourages a high/low culture dichotomy within science fiction which devalorizes those texts not judged as sufficiently intellectual by critics. There is a danger in concentrating on the intellectual works of science fiction (arbitrarily decided in any case) to the exclusion of the more escapist versions. In brief, this approach completely ignores the cultural climate and the forces of the marketplace which dictate, for the most part, the range of science fiction available in any historical period.

While I have argued that all modern SF can be rooted in the imaginative extrapolations of ancient philosophers and in folktales and fairy tales,² most

² Lloyd Biggle Jr. supports this argument. He contends that the history of literature has been chaotically mapped according to modes of transportation, what he calls the 'taxicab method'. In this sense, anytime a space ship is involved in the story, it is immediately thrown under the rubric of science fiction despite its possible resemblance to other genres. He argues that a true definition of science fiction lies in "humanity's eternal quest for the unknown" (Biggle, 1985: 120). Biggle establishes the roots of modern fantasy and science fiction in the questions posed by people almost at the beginning of human existence:

Humans began to wonder about the moon very early in their conscious existence... The first interplanetary romance was born years before Lucian when a tribe gathered at night

feminist SF critics locate the roots of the genre in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). As noted by Armitt, however, some science fiction critics are reluctant to acknowledge Shelley's achievement and prefer to consider the scientific journals of the twentieth century as the origin of American science fiction (Armitt, 1991: 4).³ I contend that Shelley's work is of obvious importance in the development of SF and is especially significant for a feminist SF critic. Not only is it the first example of modern science fiction written by a woman, many critics argue that the story deals with essentially 'feminine' concerns: the crisis of the afterbirth (Roberts, 1993: 16). Ellen Moers describes this theme in *Frankenstein* as: "...the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences" (quoted in Shinn, 1986: 20).

According to Roberts, *Frankenstein* develops several of the themes later evident in much feminist SF: motherhood, male science vs. alternative science and the Demeter myth (Roberts, 1993: 10). She argues that Shelley's novel served as a model for the misogynistic science fiction of later years by introducing the first alien monster embodying 'feminine' concerns and the concept of "...science as a male substitute for the female power of reproduction" (Roberts, 1993: 10).

on an African hilltop to look at the moon and listen raptly while an archetypal sage, or bard, or witch doctor spun tales about it. (Biggle: 1985: 119).

³ Armitt points to Darko Suvin and John Griffiths as science fiction theorists who disregard Shelley's importance in shaping the science fiction tradition.

Roberts stipulates that the ability of women to give birth is conceived as a threat to male dominance, and hence fostered the inelegant portrayals of the evil female alien in the pages of the science fiction pulps. While this may be true, women writers in later years such as C.L. Moore and Joanna Russ have certainly found validation in Shelley's work for their own writing. For instance, in *The Female Man* (1975), the narrator Joanna says "I am a poet! I am Shelley! I am a genius!" (Russ in Donawerth & Kolmerten, 1994: 8).

Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as well as the lesser known, *The Last Man* (1826), critique science and offer a warning about misusing power. In *The Last Man*, a plague brings death to the population of a near-future world. Science and human intervention prove ineffective against the disease, the destructive force of nature. According to Roberts, the plague in Shelley's novel is personified as female, just as femininity is traditionally associated with nature (Roberts, 1993: 21). Indeed, contemporary writers such as Joanna Russ, Suzy McKee Charnas, Octavia Butler and Vonda McIntyre use natural disasters to represent the destruction of the patriarchal order much as did Shelley. As will be discussed in chapter four, Nicola Griffith also uses a natural disease to ensure the absence of men on planet Jeep.

Roberts associates the plague in *The Last Man* with the Demeter myth in which Demeter's anger destroys the earth, turning it into a frozen wasteland.

Similarly, she suggests that the winter setting of *Frankenstein* - a setting recurring in much modern feminist SF, including *Ann.onite* - also evokes this Greek myth. But in her unique analysis of women rewriting myth, Thelma Shinn challenges Roberts's contention of Frankenstein's grief resembling the suffering of Demeter at the loss of Persephone: "Yet even a cursory reading of the text reveals that Victor has abandoned the monster and only suffers anguish at the thought of confronting his creation for any other purpose than its destruction" (Shinn, 1986: 20). The frozen landscape, however, is conjured in numerous works of feminist SF, from Margaret Cavendish's utopia *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World* (1668) where an Empress governs Blazing-World in the North Pole, to Ursula Le Guin's acclaimed *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) set on a world called Winter.⁴ A place seemingly devoid of life, unexplored and blank, is a fitting metaphor for women's need to distance themselves from patriarchy. They can write whatever they dream into being in this unexplored place. Naomi Jacobs offers her own explanation of the attraction of the frozen landscape for many feminist SF writers:

The frozen landscape is one in which physical growth and decay are stilled; it is also free of those institutions and mores that restrict women in the social world. Because untouched by birth, death, politics, or power, the seemingly sterile fields can become fertile ground for the female imagination and a place where radical

⁴ Ursula Le Guin asserts, however, that the winter metaphor in *Left* is related to the underlying themes of betrayal and fidelity in the story and not to the exploration of feminist themes (Le Guin, 1989: 8).

confrontations and reconceptualizations become possible. (Jacobs, 1994: 190).

Whether related directly to feminist themes and the Demeter myth or not, the frozen landscape in *Frankenstein* and the themes of motherhood and science explored therein are certainly echoed in many later works of feminist SF. In this sense, a picture of the feminist SF tradition, a history of women SF writers, is gradually taking shape like a puzzle; one piece at a time.

In addition to *Frankenstein* and the Gothic tradition it inspired (and of course the folktale and fairy tale roots of SF), I have identified five historical trends which shaped the feminist SF tradition: (1) female dystopias, (2) early feminist utopias of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, (3) American pulp magazines of the 1930s to 1950s, (4) feminist science fiction of the late 1960s and 1970s and (5) the 1980s to the present. It was specifically in the experimental age of the 1970s, however, that feminist SF virtually exploded into being and carved a place for itself in the science fiction market. The last two decades have seen a consolidation of this position, a growing number of women writers and editors in both science fiction and fantasy, and a considerable body of critical literature devoted to the study of feminist SF.

Female Dystopias

Just as feminism is a reaction to the oppressive conditions in which women live, modern feminist SF was partly inflamed by the abundant dystopian worlds where women were made powerful only to be ridiculed. Bulwer-Lytton's *Vril: The Power of the Coming Race* (1871) and Besant's "The Revolt of Man" (1882) are, according to Roberts, two early female dystopias which exemplify the genre (Roberts, 1993: 28). Women are placed in positions of power and dominion over men only to demonstrate their complete incompetence in such a role. Roberts argues that the women rulers in these stories are consistently portrayed as "...godless, scienceless and sexually aggressive" (Roberts, 1993: 30) and thus deserving of a 'conversion' to the 'natural order' of things. The female societies are proven to be stagnant without the progressive force of science and patriarchy is inevitably reinstated. And worse yet, women seem relieved to give up power to triumphant men, and quite content to confine themselves to the domestic sphere (Roberts, 1993: 30).

This dystopian thread continues in the science fiction of the early twentieth century. In her essay "Amor Vincit Foeminam: The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction" (1980),⁵ Joanna Russ discusses several female dystopias, what she terms 'Flasher books' because of their reliance on biology to win the battle of

⁵ For reference, this essay was republished in Russ's recent book *To Write Like a Woman* (1995) and this is the version I will be quoting.

the sexes. In other words, the men are always victorious because they possess the 'Sacred Objects:' male genitalia. The stories in her analysis span from the late 1920s - Booth Tarkington's "The Veiled Women of Atlantis" (1926), David H. Keller's "The Feminine Metamorphosis" (1929), Wallace G. West's "The Last Man" (1929)⁶ - to the seventies - Edmund Cooper's *Gender Genocide* (1971) and Bruce McAllister's "Ecce Femina!" (1972). Russ's brief description of these female dystopias goes as follows:

To summarize, the men's Sacred Objects - the badge of authority and means of domination over others - are stolen or contaminated by women, who then become dominant over men...Women lose because they abuse this power or are immoral (in various ways, e.g. incest), whereupon the men seize or reclaim the Sacred Objects, sometimes with supernatural aid. The purpose of the story is to show that women cannot handle power, ought not to have it, and cannot keep it. (Russ, 1995: 42).

The inclusion of Poul Anderson's *Virgin Planet* (1959) in the illustrious ranks of these dystopias is somewhat in question. Roberts equates the *Virgin Planet* and Besant's *Revolt of Man* (1882) by stating that the moral is the same in both stories: "female culture means cultural degeneration" (Roberts, 1993: 36), whereas Russ is more hesitant in her classification. I would argue here, along with Jacqueline Pearson, that the title "Virgin Planet" evokes all those images of conquest which pervade male-dominated science fiction. Pearson suggests that feminist Sci

⁶ Many of these early stories were republished in the volume edited by Sam Moskowitz published in 1972, *When Women Rule*.

writers invoke metaphors of self-discovery rather than conquest in their stories of planetary exploration (Pearson, 1990: 20).

At various periods in history, women have reacted to these dystopias with vigour and imagination. Their own visions were no doubt shaped in response to these portrayals of abusive, and yet cowardly, women rulers. Joanna Russ has declared a "battle of the sexes" and Marleen Barr discusses feminist utopias and female dystopias in the context of "the literary gender war" (in Barr, 1993: 68). The next battle move for women, was to virtually eliminate men in their fictional worlds.

Early Feminist Utopias

Jane Donawerth and Carol Kolmerten have retraced a history of what they call women's 'literature of estrangement,' a term which includes various forms of utopian and science fiction. They stress the "...relation between utopian writing and political change..." (Donawerth & Kolmerten, 1994: 3) and assert that the category of 'literature of estrangement' allows them to include in their historical recovery several genres in which women imagine a better place. Their project is important to feminist SF because it traces a continuing tradition in which women can validate their own authorship and it reclaims a history of women's utopian writing where, as indicated above, certain themes and subjects (i.e. the winter landscape) recur with stunning regularity. As elegantly

expressed by Joanna Russ, without historical precedence, the battle appears to be only beginning:

When the memory of one's predecessors is buried, the assumption persists that there were none and each generation of women believes itself to be faced with the burden of doing everything for the first time. (Russ, 1983: 93).

Although it may have seemed to the writers of Russ's generation that there was no founding tradition of feminist science fiction - mainly because many of the early feminist utopias were neglected until they were reprinted in the early 1970s⁷ - these writers certainly seemed to explore many of the themes which appeared in feminist utopias almost a century before them. Why? Is this thematic continuation simply the design of feminist researchers made to justify their claims of a continuing feminist SF tradition? Or are these themes simply reflective of the desires of these women as an oppressed group throughout history?

Donawerth and Kolmerten attempt to situate utopian writing by women, at various historical points, in relation to the movements of feminism at the time. In this sense, Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing-World* (1668) arises out of "...the movement to acquire education for women in seventeen-century

⁷ Lefanu states that there were many feminists involved in the utopian movement of the late nineteenth century such as Anna Wheeler, Emma Martin and Frances Morrison who suffered ostracism and material hardship for their beliefs. The utopian tradition of men, however, was the one to be passed down to us, mainly Thomas More's *Utopia*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) (Lefanu, 1988: 56).

Europe..." (Donawerth & Kolmerten, 1994: 4), while the American feminist utopias of the late nineteenth century reflect the first wave of feminism and offer "collective or mechanical alternatives" to housework and childcare as a means of attaining political equality (Pfaelzer, 1994: 143). In *Blazing-World* (1668), for example, the Duchess of Newcastle embodies her dreams of becoming philosopher and poet by creating a world in which an Empress speculates about the nature of things with prominent philosophers and scientists of the seventeenth century. In this sense, she anticipates the tradition of inquiry which characterizes science fiction. Cavendish urges readers to make their own utopias and argues that "the desires of women can best be achieved by claiming discursive rather than material power" (Khanna, 1994: 32). The later utopias of the early twentieth century, however, reflect the feminist movement at the time - usually known as the first wave of feminism (Lefanu, 1988; Russ 1977) - which emphasized the need to gain control of reproduction and to reshape the domestic sphere (Roberts, 1993: 74).

The separatist trend so evident in many of the feminist utopias in the 1970s can be clearly seen in texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Mary Bradley's Lane's *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1880) envisions a separatist society in which women transform food production and motherhood into sophisticated sciences. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Herland" (1915), men

have been extinct for 2000 years and women have survived and reproduced by parthenogenesis since the disappearance of men. Lefanu suggests that Gilman's transformation of the mother/daughter relationship into a vision of community childrearing anticipates the utopias of the future (Lefanu, 1988: 57). Certainly, Marge Piercy's later ideas of technological mothers and equal responsibility in childrearing are not far off.

Roberts accuses these early separatist utopias of essentialism in their complete eradication of men and their exclusionary vision (Roberts, 1993: 72-73). *Mizora*, in particular, recalls a certain frightening racist movement in Germany: all the Mizorans have blond hair and blue eyes. The weakness of the separatist approach, then, is that the writer "...runs the risk of excluding others from the very freedom she creates for her select group of characters" (Roberts, 1993: 72). Although the same problem persists in the feminist utopias of the 1970s, feminist writers and theorists in the last decade have problematized the notion of a cohesive group of women with similar experiences of oppression and equivalent emancipatory goals. *Ammonite*, written by Nicola Griffith in 1992, espouses a separatist scenario quite similar to those imagined by Lane or Gilman where reproduction is achieved through self-induced parthenogenesis and men cannot survive on Jeep. It remains to be seen whether Griffith has escaped the essentialist trap in the portrayal of her own separatist vision.

The Pulp Magazine Age

Traditionally known as the "Golden Age" of science fiction, - I suspect because of copious stories based on pure science and technological extrapolation - the pulp magazine age is usually characterized by science fiction historians as almost exclusively male. Patricia Monk argues that the era of science fiction pulps incited an 'androcentric mystique' characterized by gadgetry, adventure and androcentric thinking (Monk, 1980: 18). Jane Donawerth, however, shows the continuation of the nineteenth century feminist utopias in the pages of the very early pulp magazines. For example, Clare Winger Harris published short stories in *Weird Tales* in 1926 and in *Amazing Stories* in 1927 (Donawerth, 1994: 137). She was followed by many other women writers who published in the pulp magazines during the late 1920s and early 1930s.* Like their male contemporaries, these women wrote with the technological optimism of the age. Rather than spaceships and time machines, however, they imagined technological devices to facilitate domestic duties and perfect home environments. In their short stories, they abolish the messiness of food, they rid themselves of dirty cities and imagine a world where women need not fear the dangers of childbirth (Donawerth, 1994: 139-140).

* For instance, Donawerth discusses stories by Sophie Wenzel Ellis, Minna Irving, Louise Taylor Hansen, Lilith Lorraine, Kathleen Ludwick, Louise Rice and Leslie F. Stone.

Although she admits these feminist pulp stories are not well documented, Donawerth chastises feminist SF critics for their ignorance of these women writers: "Both traditional historians of science fiction and feminist ones have expected women not to appear in the pulps and have invented reasons for their absence" (Donawerth, 1994: 137). A case in point, Robin Roberts fails to mention any women pulp science fiction writers in her historical overview of feminist science fiction. She suggests rather that the cover art of strong female aliens defeated the misogynistic depiction of women within the pulp pages and provided women readers with images they could later appropriate for their own purposes (Roberts, 1993: 43). I remain skeptical, however, of the argument that women readers of the time felt any kinship to the scantily clad female monsters on the cover pages of these magazines.

Nonetheless, Marion Zimmer Bradley, herself a beginning writer in the 1950s, maintains that she became involved in science fiction through pulp magazines and fandom. Her attraction to the genre, however, was not based on pictures of well-endowed alien women, but on her desire to read and write about "people actually *doing things*" (Bradley, 1977: 34). She elaborates: "I read stories by, and *about* men, because in those days women didn't do interesting things, in or out of fiction" (Bradley, 1977: 34). C. L. Moore's fierce Amazon warrior woman, Jirel of Joiry, was certainly an anomaly at a time when male

heroes were the norm. According to Bradley, the marketplace dictated the need for male heroes and the "few women who wrote science fiction were working within the concerns of the marketplace" (Bradley, 1985a: 27). In other words, they wrote about men, and sometimes, as we have seen, disguised their own gender with ambisexual pseudonyms. Catherine Moore, for example, often published under her husband's and writing partner's name (Henry Kuttner) depending on the editor of the magazine (Bradley, 1985a: 28). Women writers, then, were *present*, if somewhat invisible. As it happens, women editors were also a rarity in the early days of science fiction. Among the exceptions were Betty Ballantine who was science fiction editor for Ballantine Books in the mid-1950s, publishing writers such as Arthur C. Clarke and Ward Moore; Cele Goldsmith, an editor of *Amazing Stories* in the late 1950s; and Judy-Lynn Benjamin (Judy-Lynn Del Rey), assistant to John W. Campbell at *Analog*. Judy-Lynn Del Rey, however, was later instrumental in forming the science fiction oriented Del Rey imprint under Ballantine Books, and in the mid-1970s, became editor-in-chief and then publisher in 1982. According to Clute and Nicholls, "At the time of her death[1986], she had become the dominant figure in US sf and fantasy publishing" (Clute & Nicholls, 1993: 320).

The one crucial development in the 1940s and 1950s, however, was the rise of fandom and fanzines⁹ which essentially defined the interaction of writers and readers in the genre for years to come. An active community formed alongside the commercial industry. Many science fiction 'greats' such as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Robert Silverberg and Donald Wollheim rose through the ranks of fandom to become professional writers and editors (Bradley, 1985b: 69). As exemplified by Marion Zimmer Bradley, C.L. Moore, Andre Norton and Leigh Brackett, some women too, made their professional debut in this age. Unlike some of her male contemporaries who would rather forget their humble beginnings, Bradley advocates fandom as valuable to the professional writer. Bradley speaks of it as a "support group" and as fanzines as a "training ground for writing and editorial skills" (Bradley, 1985b: 76). She describes a "very strong sense of togetherness" in the early days of fandom when there was not a huge gulf between new writers and established ones (Bradley, 1985b: 71-72). The friendship and support network of fandom may indeed have facilitated, to a certain extent, the entrance of women fan fiction writers into the professional circle. It most certainly did a few years later, in the 1970s, with the advent of *Star*

⁹ 'Fanzine' is the term used by science fiction fans to designate magazines circulated among themselves which contain stories, poetry etc. relating to the genre. Marion Zimmer Bradley explains the state of fanzines in the 1980s:

There are fanzines which run all the way from the two-page "personal-letter-mimeographed-for-a-few-close-friends" in the various *apas* [amateur press associations], to highly professional fiction magazines with two-color and printed literary journals of serious criticism, many of which pay for material accepted and consider themselves all but *prozines* (magazines for professionals). (Bradley, 1985: 74-75).

Trek fandom; a phenomenon which was chiefly dominated by women (Jenkins and Tulloch, 1995: 11). Indeed, Pamela Sargent suggests that the *Star Trek* television series “may have attracted more women to science fiction than did the women’s movement” (Sargent, 1995: 3).

The Explosion of Feminist SF

The 1960s, a decade fraught as it was with radical political movements, brought to science fiction what is commonly known as the ‘New Wave:’ a trend which encouraged literary experimentation and social critique. Authors and editors alike had grown bored with the complacency of much of the genre (Kaveney, 1989: 85) and the climate of the times certainly legitimized a more satirical and politically-informed approach to popular literature. Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) is by far the most significant work of feminist science fiction at this time. The novel is, by her own definition, a “thought-experiment” about a world without socially-created gender distinctions (Le Guin, 1979: 162). The normally androgynous Gethenians have the potential to become either male or female temporarily during their time of *kemmer*; their period of sexual activity. Socially-constructed categories of gender, then, are irrelevant on Winter.

Le Guin is hailed as “the only female to achieve widespread respect” in the field of science fiction (Barr, 1993: 103) and was awarded both the Nebula

Award in 1969 and the Hugo Award in 1970 for *The Left Hand of Darkness*.¹⁰

According to a poll in *Locus* magazine¹¹ conducted in 1987, Le Guin was the only woman writer in the top twenty SF novelists of all time (fourth) and second only to Tolkien in the top fantasy writers list (Yntema, 1988: 70). Moreover, her various novels and stories are frequently discussed in the works of many feminist SF critics (Lefanu, 1988, Barr, 1981, Rosinsky, 1984, Roberts, 1993, Spivack, 1987).

Although her influence on science fiction has obviously been considerable, *Left* has been criticized by feminists for androcentrism because it addresses feminist issues through a male narrator (Jacobs, 1994: 200) and because the supposedly androgynous people of Gethen are consistently referred to as men with the generic, or universal *he*. Joanna Russ maintains that there are no women in *Left* at all and that Le Guin fails to let go of stereotypical gendered behaviour (Russ, 1972b: 90).¹² Certainly some passages reveal Le Guin's "own deep acceptance of a male-oriented world" (Jones, 1986: 10) such as the following: "They lacked it seemed, the capacity to *mobilize*. They behaved like animals, in

¹⁰ LeGuin has also received these awards, as well as the National Book Award, for other works of science fiction.

¹¹ *Locus* is the newspaper of the science fiction field. Published on a monthly basis, it includes news about the science fiction publishing industry, upcoming books, reviews, conventions and awards. It is by far the most comprehensive publication with regards to the science fiction community.

¹² Le Guin has since responded to some of these criticisms in her rewriting of the essay "Is Gender Necessary: Redux" (1989). In reference to her previous insistence on the generic male pronoun, she writes: "I still dislike invented pronouns, but I now dislike them less than the so-called generic pronoun he/him/his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse" (Le Guin, 1989: 15). Le Guin also reconsiders her "naively pragmatic view" of heterosexuality in *Left* and suggests that the story would have been very different had she written it at a later time.

that respect; or like women. They did not behave like men, or ants" (Le Guin, 1969: 49). Despite the contradictions inherent in *Left*, its literary and commercial success certainly opened the way for the feminist writers to follow. Lefanu rightly acknowledges Le Guin's inspirational influence on future writers:

In her fiction and in her criticism, the fact that she cares about the craft of writing shines like an encouraging beacon to reader and to other writers, while the lucidity and grace that she strives for ensure the accessibility of her work...(Lefanu, 1988: 131).

Le Guin has written prolifically in both science fiction and literary criticism since the 1960s and has gradually shifted to an overtly feminist approach in her more recent work (e.g. *Always Coming Home*, 1985).

Developing in parallel with the experimental attitude in science fiction circles during the New Wave, the second wave of feminism was also taking hold around this time. In 1970, Shulamith Firestone published *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* which introduced the nature/culture debate and the argument that the oppression of women was directly linked to their role as childbearers and childcare providers (Lefanu, 1988: 57). The feminist utopias of the 1970s, for the most part, expressed in fiction the concern of contemporary feminists about the exploration of gender as a socially-constructed category. Lefanu argues that the utopian society of Mattapoisett in Marge Piercy's now classic *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) "gives flesh to Firestone's theories" by imagining a society in which the division of labour is radically altered by a

technology liberating women from their reproductive functions (Lefanu, 1989: 181).

In science fiction and academic circles, Joanna Russ also certainly made her presence felt in the 1970s. Roz Kaveney considers Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) "...the most important single SF novel of the 1970s, in the way it combines its literary experimentation with its radical politics, in its anger and its wit and its poise" (Kaveney, 1989: 87). The novel suggests different alternative realities, different ways in which the author constructs her identity as a feminist, as a woman in a patriarchal world and the ways in which she can resist that order. Russ's writing is threatening, not imploring; she takes the reader "by the scruff of the neck, shakes her, enrages her and makes her laugh" (Lefanu, 1989: 189). Despite her "distressingly overt" politics, Russ succeeds in subverting the science fiction narrative by making use of multiple protagonists and narrators, as well as various literary forms (Lefanu, 1989: 189).

Like *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Female Man*, many of the feminist utopias of the 1970s - Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines* (1978), Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1979) and James Tiptree Jr.'s (Alice Sheldon) "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" (1976) to name a few - were separatist visions of women's societies which emphasized communal values, sexual liberty, ecological awareness, and non-violence. They are often

criticized for their essentialism, but they did succeed in fulfilling a felt need to reject earlier traditional and conservative attitudes, both within science fiction and without. Jenny Wolmark calls these stories based on the 'disaster' convention "exceedingly deterministic" because the female communities only reproduce gender relations of domination and inequality. The only difference is that the power is placed in the hands of women instead of men (Wolmark, 1994: 81). Nonetheless, their radical politics reflect and embody those at work in the feminist movement of the time and contribute to the development of feminist ideas. The prevailing attitude of these writers is expressed with wonderful precision in this brief statement by Joanna Russ:

I believe separatism is primary, and that the authors are not subtle in their reasons for creating separatist utopias: if men are kept out of these societies, it is because men are dangerous. They also hog the good things in this world. (Russ, 1995: 140).

Counter to this separatist position, Marleen Barr calls for utopias that show women how to live *with* men. She says it is "unnecessary to continue the gender war" (Barr, 1993: 79). Given that men are most likely to be on this world just as long as women are, I think Barr's position here is reasonable.

Utopias, however, were not the only examples of feminist SF during the 1960s and 1970s. Women writers were entering the fantasy realm in larger numbers and creating worlds where telepathy, witchcraft and goddess-worship supplemented the communal and ecological concerns of the feminist utopias.

Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Shattered Chain* (1976) is often cited by scholars concerned purely with science fiction as such, but is considered by publishers and many readers as a work of fantasy set within Bradley's well-known world of Darkover. In this novel, Bradley introduces a group of women called "The Free Amazons" who reject the patriarchal structure of Darkover and take an oath to reject the binding chains of marriage (and in some Darkover societies, those chains are literal), and serve only their own interests in terms of love and motherhood. Their separatist community remarkably resembles the utopias discussed above in terms of values and organization. In fact, the alternative world of Darkover captured such a large following that a fandom organization, The Friends of Darkover, was founded. Some fans, such as Susan Schwartz for example, entered the professional writing field from their contributions to Darkover fandom (Bradley, 1985: 76).

Fantasy, sometimes also known as 'sword-and-sorcery,' served the interests of feminism by creating strong female characters and by articulating traditionally 'feminine' knowledge and lore which were devalued in the historical development of science and the patriarchal order. Witchcraft, herb-lore, goddess-worship and psionics (telepathy, mind-reading, magical powers) are common themes developed in these works of fantasy, sometimes in direct opposition to the patriarchal values of science and rationalism. The positive

treatment of the occult and telepathy is, according to Annegret Wiemar, a way in which women fantasy writers are reclaiming women-centered traditions of witchcraft and focusing on empathy as a key component in communal life (Wiemer, 1987: 171). Beginning in the 1960s, Andre Norton created the *Witch World* series in which the opposition of technology and nature is embodied in the war of two societies: the society of men and technological progress and the society of witches who live in harmony with nature.

Despite their efforts to reclaim the witch as a powerful image for women, these fantasy authors are often criticized by feminists for “selling out to the male establishment” (Bradley, 1988: 85), for catering to market demands rather than political ideals. Gwyneth Jones calls the fiction of Marion Zimmer Bradley and Anne McCaffrey “feminine SF” and demeans their value by describing them in terms of “lots of pretty clothes” and “colourful pseudo-mediaeval culture” (Jones, 1986: 10). However, these arguments only apply to a literary criticism approach. My own position advocates the consideration of these texts within the larger context of their production and reception. Their subversive potential cannot be judged on the basis of the text alone. For as noted by Anne Cranny-Francis, McCaffrey’s success in the marketplace indicates that her less problematic stance may be a useful compromise given the size of her readership (Cranny-Francis: 1990: 71). In this sense, the huge commercial success of these novels - they are

read by a large number of both men and women - should also be considered in the assessment of their effectivity as subversive texts.

Whether radical separatist visions of alternative matriarchal societies or reappropriations of female myth and lore, the feminist SF of the 1960s and 1970s invigorated the feminist debates of the time and served to inspire many other women to join the ranks of SF writers. Moreover, the readership of SF would certainly never again be mistaken for a group made up exclusively of pre-pubescent males. In short, science fiction, as a genre and as a market, had been drastically altered by Russ and her contemporaries.

The 1980s to the Present

The headway feminist writers had made into SF during the 1970s was not always accepted with grace by conservative science fiction writers, editors and fans. Feminist writers were using the genre to question societal assumptions about gender and sexuality, and the traditional faction, born out of the technological optimism of Jules Verne, insisted on pure scientific extrapolation. It was an old debate in science fiction, but the new advocates of literary experimentation, both in content and in form, were now women.

Although the number of women SF writers had increased, the 1980s saw the rise in popularity of more traditional, commercial science fiction, due in large part to the phenomenal success of the movie *Star Wars* (Sargent, 1995: 6). Pamela

Sargent suggests that publishers "were confronted with the fact that there was a much wider audience for traditional adventure stories than for innovative fiction" (Sargent, 1995: 3). Perhaps as part of this return to adventure, many authors in the 1980s found new inspiration in Arthurian legend.¹³ Many of these Arthurian rewritings, however, placed significantly more importance on the women characters of this legend - perhaps due to the higher proportion of women writers in fantasy or to the new awareness cultivated by the second wave of feminism. Jeanette Smith's analysis corroborates this assertion:

In the last fifteen years, parallel to and undoubtedly influenced by the rise of the Women's movement, women's values have finally been evidenced in many contemporary fantasy versions of the Arthurian legend... (Smith, 1994: 132).

Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* can be seen as part of this larger Arthurian trend, or perhaps partly its instigator. It was certainly the most commercially successful of the Arthurian trend and Barbara Gordon-Wise calls *Mists* "probably the most ambitious retelling of the Arthurian legend in the twentieth century" (Gordon-Wise, 1991: 141).

If Arthurian legend was prevalent in the fantasy genre, cyberpunk was "the most distinctive literary movement in science fiction during the

¹³ It is true, however, that the Arthurian legend has always been a popular framework for fantasy writers. Many authors still rewrite this myth in various ways in contemporary stories. I maintain, however, that the Arthurian legend did seem to be particularly popular in the early 1980s. For example, Parke Godwin's *Firelord* (1982) and *Beloved Exile* (1985), Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave* (1979), *The Last Enchantment* (1979) and *The Wicked Day* (1983), Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* series (1986-1989) and C.J. Cherryh's *Port Eternity* (1982).

1980s" (Sargent, 1993: 6). And, with few exceptions,¹⁴ cyberpunk was a form largely dominated by male writers. Despite its critical views of corporate capitalism, the movement - initiated by William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and advocated by Bruce Sterling - certainly displayed all the characteristics associated with the conservative branch of science fiction: male heroes (the 'interface cowboys') and an embrace of technology. As pointed out by Pamela Sargent, the cyberpunk movement resembled the sexist stories of the pulp age in other ways:

...most of the female characters in cyberpunk fiction occupied secondary or standard roles - a standard role in this context often being a leather-clad dominatrix, a sex object, a whore, or a victim, as opposed to being a housewife. (Sargent, 1993: 11).

But as noted by Julie Phillips, Octavia Butler has responded to the cyberpunk movement by mocking it. In her novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993), she envisions a future Los Angeles with computers and no electricity (Phillips, 1994: 72). Nicola Griffith describes cyberpunk in terms of "...all this gray, raving, mean-streets-city-urban crapola with lots of brand names, and the women trotting around in bondage gear." (in Phillips, 1994: 72).

Despite its influence, cyberpunk was faced with fierce competition within the speculative fiction genre. While some male writers were fighting wars and

¹⁴ According to Pamela Sargent, Pat Cadigan is the only female writing within the 'cyberpunk' movement. (Sargent, 1995: 11).

having sex in cyberspace, the women SF writers were revisiting the utopian tradition. The 1980s saw in feminism a process of self-evaluation and many of its original essentialist assumptions were under scrutiny. In concomitance with this, the feminist utopias of the 1980s - Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988), Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* (1986) and Joan Slonczewski's *A Door Into Ocean* (1986) - question the separatist paradigm of the 1970s feminist utopias and offer visions of future worlds on the brink of change. These worlds are usually situated in a post-nuclear setting, where women have reclaimed control of earth from the men who virtually obliterated it. Although the societies are established as separatist, the stories essentially call for a reconciliation of the sexes. According to Peter Fitting, these texts are "critical utopias" in the sense that they reexamine and rework the classic utopias of the 1970s (Fitting, 1992: 44). In the same vein, the assumptions inherent in the separatist visions of the 1970s utopias were brought into question by the work of Octavia Butler. Writing as a Black woman, Butler offers another version of feminist SF in which differences between women's experiences are not obscured in an erroneously harmonious utopian vision. As expressed by Michelle Erica Green, "Many of the texts that challenge the gender status quo ignore, erase, and repress other differences among people." (Green, 1994: 167). It seems more recent feminist SF has

acknowledged that "there are many futures and many ways to get there" (Phillips, 1994: 73).

Nicola Griffith certainly presents an innovative vision of the future in her first novel *Ammonite* (1992). *Ammonite* was the winner of the third annual Tiptree award¹⁵ in 1993 and although set on a separatist world, the book is very different from the utopias of the 1970s and 1980s. It does not exclude men out of spite or anger or fear - it simply excludes them. The diversity of women encountered on planet Jeep, too, exemplifies the new emphasis on multiple voices in feminism itself. Indeed, the last fifteen years can certainly be characterized by the attention feminist scholars and academics have paid to the feminist SF genre. As chapter four of this analysis will demonstrate, theoretical debates about the contested affiliation of postmodernism and feminism have also insinuated themselves within the discourse of feminist SF.

The last two decades have seen a consolidation of the position of women within the SF genre, not only as writers, but as editors and agents. Half the editors at Del Rey, for example, are now women and the same proportion of the books published by the company are written by women compared to one third or less ten years ago (Harris, 1995). Feminist SF has matured into one of the

¹⁵ In 1991, feminist SF gained its very own measure of merit. The Tiptree Award was established in a grass-roots effort to recognize 'gender bending' novels of high quality.

many SF subgenres, but is also distributed to feminist and lesbian bookstores and marketed to readers who would not usually choose a science fiction or fantasy novel. It could be argued that feminist SF has served to expand the market of science fiction to a broader audience. And by imagining alternatives to patriarchy, we can only hope that feminist SF has evoked in this audience - these readers - the desire to *do* something.

While the future of feminist SF seems promising, Pamela Sargent is concerned about recent publishing trends in SF which emphasize best-selling authors, books based on movies or television programs, and tried-and-true science fiction formulas and worlds (Sargent, 1995: 17). In essence, she fears that writers less in tune with commercial interests will find it more difficult to get published. I would argue that this has almost always been the case. In the following chapter, my own analysis of publishing at Del Rey attempts to better understand the forces of the market and their influence on the publication of *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite*.

Institutions of Production

"I write science fiction because that is what publishers call my books. Left to myself, I should call them novels."

- Ursula K. Le Guin

As cultural texts and mass market commodities, feminist SF novels are subject to the same institutions of production governing the rest of the book publishing industry: a set of complex social and material processes involving writers, literary agents, publishers, editors, distributors, publicists, reviewers and retailers. In short, they are controlled by the demands of the marketplace where economic considerations outweigh political ideals. Patricia Dunker expresses this when she states that the laws of the marketplace "...have nothing to do with feminism nor with quality. Publishers print what sells" (Dunker, 1992: 41). If popular culture texts are considered crucial in contesting present social arrangements of gender, then my analysis cannot ignore the institutional matrix governing the production of those texts. How can a feminist text be considered subversive if it never gets published in the first place? And if it does succeed in getting published, how much has the text been altered by editors? Is the cover art appropriate, relevant, attractive or lurid? Have reviews generated interest in the book, or have they ignored it? How is the book marketed and sold? These are the questions which will be addressed in this chapter with regards to the two texts under scrutiny: *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite*.

Gender and Genre

Writing as a Woman

Feminist scholars have examined the institutional structures of publishing and of literature and have found them wanting. Joanna Russ and Dale Spender offer their own analyses of the politics of publishing and literature, in which they argue women's work is consistently devalued and ignored without fair consideration. Russ investigates the suppression of female authorship from the 19th century to the present day. From limited educational access and social constraints of impropriety, to false categorization, the denial of women's imagination and marginalization, Russ traces the history of women's exclusion from the ranks of 'literature' as defined by male scholars (Russ, 1983). As a recent example of this tendency to deny women's creativity, Nicola Griffith complained about a male reviewer assuming her book was in some way autobiographical because the protagonist was homosexual, as is Griffith (Griffith, interview).

More concerned with present-day publishing conditions, Spender offers an interesting look at the relationship between the printed medium and power. She suggests that the print industry has, until recently, been largely male-dominated and has assumed a male readership and audience (Spender, 1989: 46). Although I would agree that men have long dominated publishing, as they have

other cultural industries, I cannot disregard gothic and romance as genres which were and are known to be read almost exclusively by women and marketed as such. In her study of romance readers, Radway points to the 'Gothic line' published by Ace Books in 1960s which was marketed specifically to women through grocery stores and drug stores (Radway, 1984: 30). Similarly, Davis argues that by the end of the seventies, the romance was "...the most significant single category within paperback publishing" (Davis, 1984: 363). Perhaps Spender's statement about the assumption of a male audience refers only to 'literary' works; a category which, as argued by Russ, is defined by a male-dominated group in any case and which she says has largely ignored the work of women writers (Russ, 1983).

It seems that both Bradley and Griffith did not encounter the walls of patriarchal publishing which Russ and Spender assure us hinder women writers. Partly in response to these assertions about the disadvantages of women in a male-dominated industry, Marion Zimmer Bradley admonishes feminist efforts to self-publish or create women-only presses and asserts that her own success, as well as the success of Leigh Brackett in the early days of SF, are a manifestation of their hard work and exceptional talent:

We made it when we knew we had to be, not as good as a man, but *better*. One of the reasons we may have been so tough was because we knew we *were* better. Any woman, we felt, could do what we had done if she were willing to work like a son of a bitch and ask no favors - and if she were really good enough...Most of us liked, or

at least saw nothing wrong with the idea of having to be better than men. (Bradley, 1985a: 31).

Thus, Bradley maintains that she has never had any problems selling her novels to publishers. Her aversion to the feminist movement in SF is partly related to accusations by feminist writers like Dorothy Bryant that Bradley had 'sold out' to the male establishment (Bradley, 1985b: 85).¹ In the sense that much of Bradley's early work was limited to the adventures of male protagonists, I can understand Bryant's assessment. Bradley's writing was certainly more economically-motivated than many feminists found appropriate. Nonetheless, with *Mists*, Bradley intentionally set out to comment on Christianity as a patriarchal institution which had forgotten and repressed the goddess figure, and to rewrite the undying legend of Morgan the Fay, not of King Arthur, for women. The fact that she had no trouble selling this novel was no doubt partly due to her reputation as a good SF writer and the quality of the book among various other factors.

Like Bradley, Griffith assured me that she did not experience difficulties getting *Ammonite* or anything else published as a woman or as a lesbian.

However, she admitted that "...generally women are given smaller advances and

¹ Dorothy Bryant is the author of *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You* (1976). Throughout the seventies, Bryant self-published her writing through the imprint Ata Books because she felt that she had no other choice (Yntema, 1988: 20). To disprove Bryant's theory that women could not get published in SF, Bradley showed her the fifteen successful novels she had published to date. Bradley recounts that "she informed me, with a superior smile, that, of course, I had only been published because I had sold out to the male establishment" (Bradley, 1985a: 32).

promoted less assiduously - and therefore develop less of a following, which means lower sales, which means lower advances next time - than men." (Griffith interview). Whether or not she thought this to be the case for her own contract with Del Rey was left unstated. But Harris's assertion that Griffith's advance was "a little more than usual" certainly implies that Griffith's gender and sexual orientation were irrelevant factors in her contract negotiation (Harris interview).

Griffith's negative experiences with sexist practices seem to stem from reviews and comments about her work, rather than from the institutions governing its publication. She talks about the critical reception of her latest novel, *Slow River*:

Men are generally perceived to be more 'exciting' and 'talented' and 'experimental.' Any woman, on the other hand, who is genuinely exciting or experimental is dismissed as being 'difficult' or 'over-mannered' or hovering over her narrative 'like a hen over her chicks.' All remarks I've had, by the way regarding *Slow River*, which I don't see as particularly experimental... (Griffith interview).

Bradley recounts a similar experience with regard to her first two stories ever published. It was the early fifties and she uncharacteristically, or perhaps ignorantly, had written stories about women. She recounts the comment of one critic: "Robert Coulson, a writer and critic, wrote 'You can always tell a Bradley story - someone has a baby'" (Bradley, 1985a: 29). While this kind of treatment might have evoked anger in other women writers, Bradley's reaction was to forego writing about women altogether. She says: "There was little response to

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encourage me to continue writing about women. Because I was eager to sell, I soon learned to write about male doings" (Bradley, 1985a: 29). In later years, Bradley was able to return to writing about women's concerns, but only after other women writers had paved the way in the publishing industry by fighting the system or creating their own. Perhaps Bradley owes more to feminism than she would like to admit.

Spender devotes a chapter of her book to a discussion of sexist reviewing practices. As one stage among many in the literary process, she argues that the relationship of book reviews to advertising and sales is often neglected in academic analyses. To a large extent, reviews are a validation mechanism for literary works or cultural texts; either promoting texts, or warning potential readers of what they judge to be shoddy work. Spender stresses the element of dependency in this process: "... in the effort to get a book 'out' to its audience, publishers and writers are in many ways dependent upon the review" (Spender, 1989: 66). This dependent relationship, according to Spender, has often been especially difficult for women writers.

Spender refers to several studies on the nature of reviews and their treatment of the sexes, one of which is a survey conducted by Margaret Atwood in 1985. Out of the ten male and ten female writers who responded to Atwood's questions about sexual bias in reviewing, no men complained, while 75% of the

women expressed their grievances at length, with examples and clippings to illustrate what they perceived as their unfair treatment (in Spender, 1989: 64). While the reviews of women's work were not necessarily unfavourable, women's writing was often judged on the basis of the author's sex, in terms of language and tone. The examples recounted by Griffith and Bradley attest to the veracity of this statement. Spender also identifies one typical response as 'she writes like a man syndrome,' where this statement is intended as a compliment.² Other studies of reviews have focused on the space allotted to female authors in general publications such as the *New York Times Book Review* and *The Globe and Mail* and found that women writers were reviewed less often and were allotted less space than their publication ratio warranted and were even sometimes lumped together in a specialty interest section.³ Thus, not only are cultural texts subject to the judgment of the publishing industry in deciding what is worthy of publication and dissemination, but also to reviewers in validating those texts once they have actually reached the market.

Of course, the growing presence of a specifically feminist sector in the print industry - from women's presses to women's bookstores - has significantly altered the balance of power and opened avenues for previously ignored or

² I cannot help but be reminded here of Robert Silverberg's comments about the writing of James Tiptree Jr. before she revealed herself as Alice Sheldon.

³ For more details about women and reviewing see Richelle Van Snellenberg (1986) for a study of *The Globe and Mail*, Marilyn French's analysis of *The New York Times Book Review* (1984/85), and the comprehensive British report of *Women in Publishing* (1987).

excluded women writers . Most notable with regards to feminist SF has been

The Women's Press, whose feminist SF list has been running since 1985.⁴

According to Patricia Dunker, the conscious policy of the Press is "to give voice to women who hitherto have not had access to print" (Dunker, 1992: 51). While their feminist SF line has been largely dominated by reprints of titles from the 1970s, Lucie Armitt suggests that The Women's Press has significantly contributed to the growing critical attention enjoyed by feminist SF and that feminist SF, in turn, has "played a large role in broadening out the readership of SF beyond the specialist clique to the more general reader interested in women's writing and issues" (Armitt, 1991: 2). Although I would agree that SF is now read more widely read than in its early days, I hesitate to attribute that rise in popularity entirely to The Women's Press and the inclusion of women readers. This assessment is too simplistic. A multitude of other factors, such as the proliferation of television and film science fiction productions have no doubt contributed to the increased popularity of the genre as well. David Hartwell corroborates this assumption: "The success of *Star Trek*, 2001, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Dune*, Marvel Comics and the whole comics convention movement...all

⁴ The feminist science fiction series by The Women's Press has reprinted titles such as Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1985), Gearhart's *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1985), Gilman's *Herland* (1986) , as well as Russ's *The Female Man* (1985), *We Who Are About To...* (1987) and *The Adventures of Alyx* (1985) among others.

contributed much more than the magazines and the books to a sudden increase in the number of fans" (Hartwell, 1984: 32).

Griffith did not consider a feminist press when trying to publish *Ammonite*. She had no need to: the Publishing Director of HarperCollins UK asked her to write a novel for him. She also characterized feminist publishing houses as having "dreadful reputations" in the publishing world. In her words, "they don't pay enough, they don't treat their writers well and they don't sell many books" (Griffith interview) - all serious considerations for any writer. Could it be that women's presses have indeed outlived their usefulness? Bradley and Griffith did not encounter many obstacles getting their feminist work published; has the mainstream industry opened itself to feminist ideas?

Spender suggests that perhaps one of the reasons why women have succeeded in infiltrating the male-dominated publishing industry is because print is relinquishing its status as primary information source: "As men follow the increasingly influential computer screens, women are left with more space in the less-valued realm of print" (Spender, 1989: 42). Indeed, the internet, where individuals can make their work available at different sites without constraints, poses a serious threat to the present infrastructure of the publishing industry. Despite the obvious question of women's access to and use of computer technology, Spender's essentialist assumption that only men have moved to new

information sources can be easily disproved. It could equally be argued that the freedom of publishing on the internet eliminates the gatekeepers of a traditionally male-dominated publishing industry, thus permitting many women (and men) to voice opinions and make their material available to a larger audience without needing the validation of an intermediary.

Labels and Ghettos

Aside from the special series by The Women's Press, most SF is published by the science fiction/fantasy imprints of mainstream publishers, and indeed some of the texts reprinted by The Women's Press were first published in the 1970s by Ace and Bantam among other imprints. But what does it mean for a work to be published as 'science-fiction' or as 'fantasy'? Labeling a text as a specific genre, as science fiction/fantasy - and placing things in conceptual boxes as we are prone to do - has significant implications for marketing and selling that cultural product. A science fiction or fantasy label presents the prospective reader with information about the text itself and an idea of who should be buying the text in the first place. In discussing her recent novel *Slow River*, Nicola Griffith says "So I suspect that what will really happen is that some readers will be put off by the fact that it is being published by an imprint that has specialized in fantasy and science fiction..." (Griffith in Slusher, 1996). In the same vein, Sarah Lefanu argues that this ghettoization has been particularly

harsh for women: "Writers have found themselves excluded from a wider audience by current mania for sub-genres...they can be used as a stick to enforce what it is that women can or cannot do, what indeed it is permissible for them to write" (Lefanu, 1991: 182).

In contrast, Brian Attebery suggests this marginalization of SF, or more specifically fantasy, is especially meaningful for women writers. He argues that women have an affinity to fantasy because of this shared oppression:

"...nonrealistic literature has something special to offer to the woman writer, who is already defined by her culture as the irrational, the disruptive, the formless, the Other" (Attebery, 1992: x). This alleged kinship between women writers and the marginalization of the genre may partly explain why so many women writers and readers have turned to fantasy as a preferred genre. However, it ignores the fact that women writers were not visible in the genre until very recently.

Del Rey Books and other publishers have adopted various strategies for dealing with this ghettoization of SF in their efforts to increase sales. In the case of Nicola Griffith's second novel, *Slow River*, for instance, Del Rey intends to keep it in a slim trade paperback format, with no science fiction label on the spine, so the book can be cross-marketed to the science-fiction, the gay/lesbian and the literary market (Caven interview). Apparently, their cross-marketing tactic is succeeding: Harris reports with unveiled enthusiasm in the August 1995

issue of the *Del Rey Internet Newsletter* that *Slow River* received a commendable review in the fiction section of the *San Francisco Chronicle* rather than a special SF review. She writes:

This is a great coup for a book that appeals to non-sf readers as well as the cognoscenti and may be a first for Del Rey! It's certainly a welcome first for the book's editor, who feels she has been peering out of the sf ghetto and desperately waving this book around since it was first turned in. (Harris, 1995b).

Mists was handled as a mainstream book by Knopf, and hence profited from the same cross-over power as Griffith's new book. Nonetheless, Bradley was well-known only within SF circles, and her name may not have inspired much recognition in the general fiction readership. And yet in spite of the limitations of SF on their market reach and their critical acclaim, Bradley and Griffith persist in writing within this genre. Why?

Bradley writes SF because she believes it to be a very valuable genre. She says "it forces people to think. People in our society and in our schools are not supposed to imagine things" (Bradley in Vernon & Carson, 1985: 130). Griffith, on the other hand, seems to have more personal reasons for writing SF: "I write SF because that's what gives me a buzz; that's the way my mind works. Mainstream work often seems to have something missing" (Griffith in Kruisweg, 1994). Thus, although aware of the disadvantages, both Bradley and Griffith have chosen SF. Both writers developed a reading preference for the genre long

before contributing to it as professionals. In other words, their work is not classified by publishers as SF despite their intentions or their wishes, unlike Josephine Saxton who says: "I am sick to death of having my work misrepresented, and put out in frightful covers and under other people's flags" (Saxton, 1991: 215).

The predictable sellers in the SF market are media tie-ins (*Star Trek* and *Star Wars* novels), sequels and prequels, and well-known, proven authors. Publishers dislike taking risks and feminist cultural texts are largely assumed to be risky business (Spender, 1989: 55). And yet, some feminist SF has indeed been published by mainstream publishing houses, sold well and even awarded the self-congratulatory status symbols of the SF genre. But how many feminist works have been deemed unpublishable by the gatekeepers of popular fiction? Indeed, a history of unpublished feminist SF would be interesting, if extremely difficult to compile. We can, however, examine what feminist SF *has* been printed and the conditions of its publication. Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this analysis to address the publication of all feminist SF, so my discussion will be limited to the conditions surrounding the publication and marketing of *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite*.

Both these texts were published by Del Rey Books,⁵ the science fiction/fantasy imprint of Ballantine Books, itself a subsidiary of Random House Inc.. This study will then begin with an analysis of the structure, policies and programs of Ballantine/Del Rey Books and proceed to a more detailed look at the specific conditions of publication, marketing and reviews of *Mists* in 1983 and of *Ammonite* in 1993. Evidently, the thirteen years separating this analysis from the date of publication of *The Mists of Avalon* have obscured certain details of the exact conditions of its publication.⁶ Previously published interviews with Marion Zimmer Bradley have, however, provided me with her opinions on the politics of publishing and her perception of *Mists*. Articles and reviews published at the time have also served to reconstruct the context in which *Mists* arrived on the market.

Apart from research in journals, trade and newspaper publications and relevant internet sites, this analysis will be informed by personal interviews conducted with three of the crucial players in the institutional matrix of book publishing: the writer, the editor and the retailer. Although I had planned to interview Marion Zimmer Bradley, she was unwilling to answer my questions

⁵ Although *The Mists of Avalon* was originally published in hardcover by Alfred Knopf Inc. in 1983, it was published in trade paperback by Del Rey Books in 1984 and remains in that format to this day. The Ballantine Publishing Group and Knopf are both subsidiaries of Random House Inc.

⁶ The editor who originally acquired the text, Lester Del Rey, is deceased. My interview with Ellen Key Harris at Del Rey Books has yielded some information, but the years have certainly rendered the exact conditions of publication and marketing somewhat vague. Luckily, the book is still in print after thirteen years and thus is still of concern to Del Rey, booksellers, and readers.

about the publication context of *Mists*. Nicola Griffith, however, was more than willing to talk about *Ammonite* and I asked her questions about the book via e-mail. Griffith's editor at Del Rey Books, Ellen Key Harris, provided insight into different aspects of publishing both *Ammonite* and *The Mists of Avalon* in another electronic interview. And finally, I conducted a personal interview with Patricia Caven, co-owner of The House of Speculative Fiction, the only specialty SF bookstore in Ottawa. Caven's distinct role in promoting and selling books is of special interest to the production process. As a specialty bookstore owner, she spends much of her time talking with her customers and recommending books.

Ballantine/Del Rey Books

Founded by Ian Ballantine in 1952, Ballantine Books brought to science fiction a certain maturity and sophistication which was lacking in its early American development and exposed many readers to the world of science fiction hitherto known only to a select group of aficionados. Arthur C. Clarke, Larry Niven and Frederik Pohl were among the authors first published by Betty Ballantine as science fiction editor. In the words of Clute & Nicholls, "the list of regular authors resembles an sf roll of honour" (Clute & Nicholls, 1993: 84). In 1965, Ballantine also printed the only authorized paperback edition of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of Rings* trilogy⁷ hence creating a market for fantasy fiction.

⁷ Some publishers, such as Ace Books, had published unauthorized editions of the books, but Ballantine's editions had a personal letter from Tolkien on the cover of each book encouraging

SF was ushered into a new era by the priority Ballantine accorded to its SF list, the first of its kind in paperback according to Clute and Nicholls, combined with the semi-abstract cover artwork of Richard Powers which gave SF a look utterly different from the accustomed pulp magazine age.⁸ Clute and Nicholls write: "...it was as if sf had suddenly grown up." (Clute & Nicholls, 1993: 84).

Kenneth Davis also praises Ballantine Books for pulling SF from the ranks of magazine publishing to book format. He asserts that before Ballantine Books, SF publishing was limited to magazines or collection anthologies:

... before 1952, no paperback publisher could lay claim to what can be called a science fiction program. Ballantine radically changed that. On the company's early lists were not only collections of science fiction from the magazines but an impressive line-up of full-length novels that became classics of the genre...(Davis, 1984: 167).

Ballantine's innovative concept of simultaneously publishing these titles in paperback and hardcover largely accounts for his overwhelming success in publishing. Shared plants for both editions lowered production costs while allowing review attention for the hardcover and wide mass-market distribution for the paperback (Davis, 1984: 161). The plan was also especially geared toward new authors who needed exposure and money: all the royalties from the

readers to purchase the Ballantine edition and no other. Not surprisingly, this special consideration garnered more sales and much publicity for Ballantine (Bartter, 1986: 29).

⁸ In discussing Richard Powers's art, Kenneth Davis calls it "...surrealistic Dali-esque imagery and geometric abstractions that were in marked contrast to the pulpish semi-clad space maidens with metallic cones on their breasts who were always in the clutches of an invading monster"(Davis, 1984: 169).

paperbacks (8%) went to the authors instead of being split with the publisher.

Davis contends that by making the author the primary beneficiary, Ian Ballantine's practices in the publishing industry were considered very subversive for the times. This concern with morality and justice was, according to Davis, very typical of Ballantine. He calls the Ian and Betty Ballantine team "socially conscious," and asserts that they were committed to such issues as peace and the environment and concerned with the social currents of America (Davis, 1984: 330). This politically-aware tendency of Ballantine Books may have been compromised in later years, however, with the creation of a new SF imprint. Del Rey Books became one of the most commercially successful SF publishers, but rarely delved into socially conscious or innovative material. In an especially astute observation, Clute and Nicholls write that Del Rey Books "...is an important sf/fantasy publisher in terms of big-selling books; it has also published a number of good books. The two categories overlap," and, I would add, sometimes they do not (Clute & Nicholls, 1993: 320).

Del Rey Books did not officially arrive on the scene until 1977 when Ballantine Books created an imprint named for Judy-Lynn Del Rey because of her great success in fantasy and science fiction publishing during the 1970s. Judy-Lynn Del Rey arrived at Ballantine Books in 1973 from an associate editor position at *Galaxy Science Fiction*. Her husband, Lester Del Rey, joined her at

Ballantine the next year. Editor-in-chief, and publisher from 1982, Judy-Lynn Del Rey “...demonstrated an extraordinary gift for marketing sf and fantasy to an unprecedentedly large audience, and her releases often hit the US bestseller lists” (Clute & Nicholls, 1993: 329). In 1986, Judy-Lynn Del Rey died and was succeeded by her husband until his retirement in 1991. Among the authors indebted to Judy-Lynn Del Rey for their debuts are Stephen R. Donaldson, Anne McCaffrey, Terry Brooks, David Eddings and Barbara Hambly.

Interestingly enough, the two most influential early female editors in SF, Betty Ballantine and Judy-Lynn Del Rey, are discussed here in the context of a study of feminist SF, but I must stress that these women were the exception in a male-dominated field. Their success is no doubt a testament to their exceptional skill and insight in publishing. Whether or not the presence of these women in positions of editorial power instigated the publication of more books by women writers or more stories dealing with feminist issues is difficult to ascertain. I suspect that their choices were governed more by a concern for sales (in a market perceived as composed almost exclusively of teenage boys), than by political ideals of equality. In short, I am reluctant to be trapped in an essentialist, liberal feminist argument that Betty Ballantine and Judy-Lynn Del Rey - because they were women - contributed significantly to the development of feminist SF or influenced the amount of women authors published by the imprint. Women

authors were also being published by their male contemporaries. For example, Donald Wollheim, founder of DAW books and also a pioneering editor in SF, discovered and published the first novels of Marion Zimmer Bradley, Andre Norton and Ursula K. Le Guin (Fleischer, 1981: 15).

After Lester Del Rey's retirement in 1991, Owen Lock became Editor-in-Chief at Del Rey, but the imprint has recently been subject to some hierarchical reorganization. In February 1996, Owen Lock was appointed to the newly created position of Vice President, Editor at Large for the Ballantine Publishing Group. Kuo-Yu Liang, formerly Del Rey Sales Manager has been named to the new position of Associate Publisher of Del Rey Books, while Shelly Shapiro remains Executive Editor at Del Rey (Del Rey Books, No. 37). The editorial staff at Del Rey remains small, as production, sales, printing and art facilities are shared with the Ballantine publishing group. There is an equal distribution of female and male editors: Veronica Chapman and Stephen Sterns as Senior Editors, and Ellen Key Harris and Stephen W. Saffel as Editors (Del Rey Home Page).

When asked if the presence of women as editors makes a difference in the kinds of books that get published at Del Rey, Ellen Key Harris answered in this way:

The women tend to acquire more 'feminist sf' than men, certainly, so it does make a difference. Lately I haven't been acquiring due to a lot of other job responsibilities, so we haven't published (or are

about to not publish, in '96) many first novels or novels with strong female characters and feminist themes (Harris, interview 1995).

Although it seems from this comment that the presence of women does make a difference in the acquisition and publication of feminist SF, - and I believe it does to a certain extent - individual editorial decisions are no doubt subject to the whims of superiors and also have a complex association with current market and social trends. In other words, the presence of women in editorial positions does not guarantee an increase in books dealing with feminist issues. The process is more complex than the personal vision of one individual.

In my interview with Ellen Key Harris, however, she insisted that Del Rey had no official publishing policies with regard to feminist, or other politically-oriented material and stated:

At least at Del Rey, we're less calculating in our editorial judgments and more personally motivated than you might think. Our main criterion is whether we think the book is well written and enjoyable, and acquisitions are pretty personal rather than based on research. (Harris, interview).

Unlike many other publishers, then, Del Rey does not have an editorial board which makes the final decisions on acquisitions (Harris, 1994b). Editors select manuscripts for publication on the basis of their personal taste as readers. The implications of this system are that individual editors may exercise considerable power in the process of cultural production. In short, they become the ultimate gatekeepers.

Nonetheless, editorial decisions, even at Del Rey, are subject to the hierarchical structure of Ballantine Books. Before production, any manuscript selected by an editor must first be discussed with the Executive Editor of Del Rey, who then discusses it with the Publisher of Ballantine Books. Thus, the editor's personal taste and fondness for the manuscript could be overruled in this approval stage. And despite their emphasis on "a matter of taste," editors admittedly consider other factors besides their own appreciation of the book in making their decisions, such as the author's track record, the 'niche' which might be filled by the book, popular or unpopular elements in the story and current trends in the marketplace (Harris, 1994b).

Thus, although Del Rey stresses the individual and personal character of its operations in its quasi self-promotional *Del Rey Internet Newsletter (DRIN)*,⁹

⁹ The *Del Rey Internet Newsletter (DRIN)* was initiated in February 1993 and is issued monthly on networks that include the Internet, America Online, CompuServe, GENie and Delphi, as well as sent specifically to the private e-mail addresses of 'subscribers'. Although Del Rey is not the only publisher to go on-line, it certainly is the most active. Aside from their home page where they make available sample chapters from upcoming titles and interviews with authors, the DRIN features articles on all the stages of book publication at Del Rey, from editing to sales promotion, a comprehensive list of upcoming books, information about author tours and signings and a question and answer forum for readers. In an 1995 article in *Publisher's Weekly* featuring Del Rey's presence on the Internet, Del Rey downplays the advertising potential of the DRIN:

Harris sees DRIN as "educational project, not publicity." In p. : Del Rey took this approach in deference to Netiquette, which is strongly anticommercial...As a result, the most common editorial change made to text submitted inhouse for DRIN is "dehyping," Harris said. The company tries to avoid merely running what could be catalogue or cover copy. The material must "pass the Timbuktu test," Harris continued. "That is, the information must be interesting to someone in Timbuktu who couldn't get the books." (Mutter, 1994: 18).

Despite their denial of publicity benefits, however, there is no doubt that the *DRIN* and the new communication avenue it opens up between readers and publisher provides Del Rey with new

economic and market considerations are never far behind. Del Rey Books is in business to make money, after all, and it is doing a fine job of it. And while the imprint maintains editorial control, its shared resources with Ballantine Books and its membership in one of the biggest publishing conglomerates in the world, Random House Inc. (purchased in 1967 by RCA and later sold to Newhouse Publications in 1980), certainly underscores economic incentives rather than individual reading predilections. Janice Radway cites the absorption of Knopf by Random House in 1960 as the beginning of a trend in book publishing toward a concentration of ownership in the hands of vast communication conglomerates (Radway, 1984: 35).¹⁰ As in all other areas of communication, there is a justified concern in the book publishing industry that control by a few powerful conglomerates leads to a focus on issues of business to the exclusion of everything else and a deterioration of the quality and variety of cultural texts available to the public. Del Rey Books, then, does not operate in isolation, as an independent publisher. It is subject to the international business incentives of Random House Inc..

Nonetheless, Del Rey's theoretical basis of operation is an admirable one.

Ideally, the editor who originally chooses a manuscript for publication is

insight into their market and an opportunity to promote their titles and create excitement about upcoming books.

¹⁰ Among Random House Inc.'s subsidiaries are Knopf, Vintage, Crown, Times Books, Pantheon and, of course, the Ballantine Publishing Group which includes Fawcett, Ivy, One World, House of Collectibles and Del Rey (Del Rey, No. 15).

assigned to edit it and see it through the process of production; a situation which Del Rey hopes "translates into good editing, exciting cover copy and attention to the cover art, a convincing presentation to the sales reps, and eventually good sales" (Harris, 1994b). As will become obvious in my analysis of *Ammonite*, however, this theoretical ideal does not always coincide with actual practices. Since its inception, Del Rey Books has been one of the leading publishers of SF, and the arrival of tough competition in the field in recent years¹¹ has no doubt instilled in its editors a healthy concern for the bottom line.

Perhaps as a consequence of a more competitive marketplace, since the 1980s Del Rey's influence has gradually been fading, according to Patricia Caven. In my interview with Caven, she offered her own impression of Del Rey Books and their current place in the SF market:

Over the years, books were known as Del Rey style books, there was a real voice that Del Rey had. I don't know if it's there as much as it used to be. I mean, there's an awful lot of competition. Del Rey was never been known for taking real chances with books or authors...they used to be the first people we paid every month, whereas now, Tor has to be up there because they're publishing a lot of people or DAW is still retaining a good part of its market...(Caven, 1996).

While she admits that many Del Rey titles are very popular with readers, Caven maintains that the material is rarely 'cutting edge,' or thought-provoking. As an

¹¹ HarperCollins created the HaperPrism science fiction/fantasy line in November 1994 and Warner revamped their SF line, Aspect, in September of the same year. In 1994, ten full-scale SF publishing lines competed in the marketplace, not including the smaller publishers also involved in the genre (Killheffer, 1994a: 33).

illustration of the perception of Del Rey Books in the industry, Caven refers to Nebula, a SF specialty bookstore in Montreal, which for a long time refused to carry any Del Rey titles at all because of the imprint's reputation for tedious and commonplace publications (Caven, 1996). Evidently, this shabby perception is obviously in stark contrast to Del Rey's own self-concept. Apparently, the SF bookbuyers disregard Del Rey's bad reputation with booksellers, if sale figures are any indication. Despite Caven's claims about its waning influence in the field, *Publisher's Weekly* reported that 1993 was a record year for the Ballantine Publishing Group where revenues increased by 40 per cent (Milliot, 1994: 20).

Del Rey Books has always taken pride in the fact that it alone accepts unsolicited manuscripts and that its editors actually sift through this 'slush pile' (the term commonly used in the industry) to find bright new writers. According to Executive Editor at Del Rey, Shelly Shapiro, this means reading through more than 3000 manuscripts each year to find the select few stories which capture the imagination (Goodrich, 1992: 18). Shapiro writes: "In all the time I've been here, we were the only publisher to consistently rely on the slushpile to bring new vigor to our list and to the field" (Shapiro, 1993).¹² She cites the success of Judy-

¹² Although Shapiro claims here that Del Rey is alone in sifting through unsolicited manuscripts, Fleischer's article on DAW Books indicates otherwise. She establishes that DAW was the first specialized paperback line devoted to science fiction and fantasy (1972) and that Donald Wollheim, its founder, was known as 'the king of the slush pile': "This means he reads unsolicited manuscripts, every single book that comes in 'over the transom' without the benefit of literary agents, many of them from science fiction readers who want to become writers" (Fleischer, 1981: 15).

Lynn Del Rey with authors such as Terry Brooks and David Eddings as proof of a long-standing commitment at Del Rey to discovering new talent (in Goodrich, 1992: 18).¹³ In the spirit of promoting new authors, Shapiro pioneered the Del Rey Discovery program in 1992, which highlights first and second novels of new writers to attract the special attention of buyers and readers. The books labeled for the Discovery program are printed in mass market paperback only and sold at a price of \$3.99 each (\$4.99 Canadian), in contrast to the regular paperback price of \$5.99 (\$6.99 Canadian): a promotional tactic which Del Rey hopes encourages buyers to take a chance on an unfamiliar name.

While Del Rey has introduced some new names in SF over the years, and continues to so with the Discovery program, what proportion of these new writers actually "invigorate" the field? By 'invigorating the field' - no doubt a very subjective assessment - I mean testing the limits of SF or addressing current issues with imagination and insight. On the other hand, Shapiro's idea of 'invigorating the field' may be very different from mine. Terry Brooks and David Eddings, although both commercially very successful authors, produce series of formula fantasy fiction based on a version of the good/evil battle made famous by J.R.R. Tolkien. In short, they offer little in terms of originality or

¹³ Ironically enough, Del Rey announced in December of 1995 that they will no longer be accepting unsolicited manuscripts due to "time constraints" (Del Rey, No. 35). The Discovery program will most likely continue, however, because they will still be accepting query letters in which potential writers may introduce their work and inquire as to the interest of the publisher in receiving the complete manuscript.

insight. That is not to say that all the books published by Del Rey should be considered as exclusively commercial or of lower literary quality. Although I cannot speak for the Discovery program in its entirety,¹⁴ *Ammonite* was first published as a Del Rey Discovery in 1993 and, as is no doubt obvious, I consider it to be a text with subversive potential and worthy of serious attention. Now that their arrival on the market can be contextualized within the history, structure and various programs and policies of Del Rey Books, I will turn to a more detailed look at the specific conditions of production for *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite*.

From Manuscript to Shelf

Money Talk

When Alfred Knopf Inc. purchased *The Mists of Avalon* from Marion Zimmer Bradley in 1982, fantasy fiction was just gaining momentum in the SF market. According to Nickianne Moody, there was a "resurgence of interest in the medieval period" in the early 1980s with the creation of the Society for

¹⁴ Since its inception in 1992, 21 books have been published in the Del Rey Discovery program. More than half of these new authors (12) were women. Because I have not read every one of these books, I cannot assess whether or not these texts are 'feminist SF,' in the sense that they address issues of gender and patriarchy. I have read *The Child Queen* by Nancy McKenzie published as a Discovery in 1994. It is another rewriting of the Arthurian legend, but from the perspective of Guinevere. Although Guinevere is presented as a strong female protagonist, the book does not challenge any assumptions about the construction of gender or even of the myth itself. According to my definition of feminist SF, then, I would not call this story feminist. I suspect many of the other texts written by women on the Discovery list are similar to *The Child Queen* in their focus on strong female characters without challenging gender and patriarchal assumptions.

Creative Anachronism, a large fan organization devoted to reliving the Middle Ages and exercising a certain amount of purchasing power (Moody, 1991: 187). As much fantasy fiction is set within the framework of medieval times, there was a growing demand for this kind of fiction. In 1977, Judy-Lynn and Lester Del Rey also published Terry Brooks's epic fantasy novel *The Sword of Shannara* and "double-handedly created the popular fantasy market" (Shapiro, 1993). And, according to Daisy Maryles, *Sword* became the first fantasy novel to appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list (Maryles, 1993). The way in which *Sword* was published by Del Rey, in trade paperback, set a precedent in the industry and partly influenced the decision to publish *The Mists of Avalon* in this format as well.

There are two advantages for publishers in using the trade paperback format: firstly, the book gets more attention from reviewers and secondly, except in cases like *Mists*, it allows the publisher two exposures for the book with slightly different markets (Del Rey, No. 5). It was rumoured that Del Rey intended to publish *Mists* in mass market paperback - as it had done with *Sword* - when the trade paperback sales slowed down. But sales never did slow down. In mass market paperback, *Mists* would have been published in four separate volumes because it could not realistically fit into one book (Harris interview). The trade edition was selling so well anyway, Del Rey wisely never bothered to

move to mass market size. In 1984, its first year in trade format, *The Mists of Avalon* sold over 250,000 copies and stayed ten weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list (*The Book Publishing Annual*, 1985: 58). There are now more than one million copies of *Mists* in print (Harris interview).

Marion Zimmer Bradley was already an established author when she sold *Mists* to Del Rey, having published more than twenty-five novels with various other publishers, including thirteen Darkover novels with DAW books.

Although I cannot be sure, I suspect her reasons for turning to Knopf and Del Rey for *Mists* were linked to Del Rey's growing reputation for success in fantasy publishing and its standing as the most prosperous publisher in the field at the time. However, when she was selling *Mists* to Knopf for hardcover publication, she was probably also considering the possibility of a larger market for her book. As a mainstream imprint, and not SF, Knopf published and marketed her novel as fiction, not as fantasy fiction. Needless to say, she was probably also motivated by the advance and contract negotiated between her agent and Lester Del Rey.

As I expected, exact details of financial contracts and sales figures were closely guarded by Del Rey. When asked about the protection of sales figures in the August 1993 issue of the *DRIN*, Harris answered:

Just like many companies, Del Rey considers our sales figures proprietary information - not quite secret, but private...we feel that sales figures on books are, like advances for those books,

information that should be between the publisher, the agent if any, and the author...(Del Rey, No. 7).

In the same vein, Harris was evasive with me when it came to discussing advances and sales. For *Mists* she said: "It got the usual advance-against-royalties deal, probably a relatively good one since MZB was an established author and *Mists* was obviously a major book" (Harris interview). For *Ammonite*, the answer was just as unspecific: "The advance was a little more than usual, but that was because it was such a good book, especially for a first novel - needed hardly any editing, was very assured etc." (Harris interview).

The 'usual' royalties for Del Rey paperbacks are between six and ten percent, rising in accordance with book sales. Royalties for hardcovers and trade paperbacks are higher and are also directly related to the book's price, so that a book like *Mists* which sells for approximately \$12.95 (U.S.) probably earns Bradley about two dollars for each sale.¹⁵ Whereas *Ammonite*, as a Del Rey Discovery selling at \$3.99 (U.S.), probably earned Griffith about thirty-five cents a copy and more when the new issue was released at the higher cover price. In terms of royalty advances to authors, Harris said that although every author is guaranteed an advance in her or his contract with Del Rey, the amount of the advance varies depending on the author's level of establishment in the field. She

¹⁵ This is based on an estimate of a 15 per cent in royalties. However, given the consistently strong sales of the book to this day, it is very possible that the percentage is even higher because, as explained by Harris, hardcover and trade royalties have more "escalators" (points in sales at which the royalty percentage goes up) than paperbacks.

states that most of Del Rey's advance money paid out goes to the best-selling authors (Harris interview). In other words, the company saves its money for the guaranteed sellers: the big-name authors and the sequels. The fund runs dry when it comes to beginning authors, and maybe books that Del Rey feels are risky business.

Editorial Decisions

In considering the purchase of *Mists* and *Ammonite*, Del Rey was faced with several other editorial decisions which might have influenced the final products. As noted earlier, editors at Del Rey consider factors such as the potential market for the book, the cost estimate for production and the resemblance of the manuscript to other bestsellers, before they finally decide to offer the author a deal. It would only be natural for a publisher to consider carefully the ramifications of associating its name with politically-charged texts as well.

In fact, Knopf seemed reluctant to attract any negative attention in first publishing *Mists*. Originally, Bradley wanted to call the book "Mistress of Magic," highlighting the special focus on Morgaine as the principle character (Bradley in Lane et al, 1985: 130). Knopf, however, refused to publish the book under this title. "Knopf is a very staid and conservative - not to say stuffy publishing house. They associated the word 'mistress' with 'I slept with

Benedict Arnold' novels - the kinds of books that have a naked lady on the cover" (Bradley in , 1985: 130). Hence, the book was to become *The Mists of Avalon* regardless of the original wishes of its author.

In the case of *Ammonite*, a book both written by and featuring a lesbian and based on a world without men, Harris assured me that no thought was given to the implications of such potentially controversial content. She said:

We hadn't published a novel with main characters who were lesbian before, but we didn't make a big deal out of that. I made sure to mention it to the sales reps who are particularly interested in gay/lesbian titles, but otherwise didn't present it as filling a niche. (Harris interview).

Harris mentions here that *Ammonite* was the first novel published by Del Rey with lesbian main characters. Other SF imprints such as DAW, Bantam Spectra and Roc Books, however, have been doing so for a few years already.¹⁶ Why was Del Rey trailing behind? Similarly, Del Rey was uninvolved for the most part in the feminist SF explosion of the 1970s. Its only venture into feminist science fiction, according to Harris's limited memory, is the publication of a collection of short stories by James Tiptree Jr. in the late 70s (Harris interview). And although Knopf published Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* in 1976, the mass market

¹⁶ For example, DAW books handles the work of Mercedes Lackey, whose books are based on a alternate world where sexual preference is irrelevant and many of her principle characters are homosexual (*Heralds of Valdemar* series (1987-88), *The Last Herald Mage* series (1989-91), and *The Oathbound* (1988) all feature gay or lesbian main characters). DAW also publishes Tanya Huff, a lesbian fantasy writer and Melanie Rawn, who also has homosexual content in some of her books. Bantam Spectra published Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* in 1975 and Pamela Sargent's *On the Shore of Women* in 1987.

edition was not published by Del Rey, but by Fawcett, because it was not marketed as science fiction, but as mainstream fiction.

Ammonite, then, was Del Rey's first venture into lesbian/feminist territory. Any concerns the imprint may have had about this move, however, would have been alleviated by the proliferation of such books published by its competition and doing fine in the marketplace. Harris even considered the lesbian element one of the book's selling points because it could be cross-marketed to gay/lesbian bookstores (Harris interview). Patricia Caven also suggests that there is currently a trend in the marketplace for lesbian main characters: "One of the trends I see right now is that lesbianism is really hot and there are lots of books with lesbian characters" (Caven interview). It seems, then, that Del Rey was certainly not pioneering a new acceptance of feminist and lesbian SF. Even though most of the SF featuring lesbian characters is to be found in fantasy, rather than science fiction, Del Rey was only cashing in on a trend already in existence. When asked if they would have published the book ten years ago, Harris answered: "I think there would have been some worry about the lesbian stuff ten years ago... It certainly would have caused *much* more of a stir then than it did in 1993" (Harris interview).

Although Del Rey does not make use of market research and demographics, the editors do operate on the basis of market appeal. The market

Ellen Harris imagined for *Ammonite* was one made up mostly of women and younger men (Harris interview). In the case of *Mists*, on the other hand, Knopf and Del Rey probably could not have predicted the extent to which readers would be drawn to the book. Although it could be argued that *Mists* created a market for women-centered fantasy, Harris describes the phenomenon slightly differently:

I think what *Mists* created was not a market but a realization in the minds of publishers that this sort of book had an audience. So in some ways I guess I'd say it catered to a previously *unknown* audience.

The distinction between the creation of a market and the realization in the minds of publishers, I think, is somewhat negligible. In short, *Mists* provided the whole publishing industry, and particularly the science fiction/fantasy publishers, with a new direction, a new 'subgenre' full of potential.¹⁷

Patricia Caven attributes *Mists'* success to "being at the right place, at the right time" (Caven interview) by which she alludes to pulling in the threads of major social trends of the time and capturing the imagination of many readers. Certainly the rising interest in neo-paganism can explain the appeal of the book to many readers, but the classic appeal of the Arthurian legend cannot be

¹⁷ In an article published in *Vogue* magazine, Isaac Asimov writes: "It is the feminization of science fiction that has broadened and deepened the field to the point where science fiction novels can now appear on the bestsellers lists" (Asimov, 1982: 608).

discounted. *Mists* continues to be a consistent seller, says Caven, and has become a classic of the fantasy field.

Marketing and Promotion

When Knopf published *Mists* in hardcover, it was marketed to mainstream bookstores as “real fiction” not as fantasy fiction and Knopf stressed the Arthurian elements rather than the feminist or fantasy ones (Harris interview). When it came time for Del Rey to publish the book in trade paperback, *Mists* had already proven its success in the marketplace. Being a specialty SF imprint, Del Rey marketed *Mists* as an “Arthurian fantasy by an established fantasy author” (Harris interview). Although Del Rey publicists gave *Mists* a fair amount of advertising, their job must have been greatly facilitated by its success in the mainstream fiction market.

Nickianne Moody offers an interesting market analysis of *Mists* and other ‘sword-and-sorcery’ novels written by women. She suggests that “historically-oriented fantasy on science fiction shelves may well be repackaging of material which does not conform to the stringent formula of romance” (Moody, 1991: 187). In other words, Moody considers works like *Mists* to be romance novels set within a historical period which allows women writers to promote strong female characters without artifice. Being classified as fantasy, argues Moody, frees these

women authors from working within the constraints of the women's romance (Moody, 1991: 189).

Despite her establishment of parallels between romance novels and *Mists*, Moody quite inconsistently proceeds to present *Mists* as a feminist text. While I would agree that some women fantasy writers no doubt echo the narrative style of the romance genre in their work, *Mists* certainly cannot be considered a romance novel. The romantic elements specific to the Arthurian legend are, in *Mists*, played out as part of Gwenwhyfar's oppression under Christianity. Nonetheless, Knopf may have implicitly marketed the book to romance readers when it published it as 'mainstream fiction.' Moody admits that she does not know whether her assumed classification "has been implemented by publishers/marketers, booksellers or readers" (Moody, 1991: 186). Nor does Moody attempt to find out. By asking the readers, this study may clarify whether it is indeed the readers of romance who have turned to fantasy novels as an alternative.

As a debut author, Nicola Griffith was not entitled to the same amount of publicity given to established authors at Del Rey. In fact, *Ammonite* did not get any attention from the Ballantine Publicity/Marketing departments at all. As explained by Harris, Del Rey's mass market originals, including the Discovery books, do not usually get publicists. The publicity and marketing of the book is

left to the author, sometimes in coordination with the editor assigned to the book. In the case of *Ammonite*, Griffith and her partner Kelley Eskridge composed their own 'fake publisher's promo sheet,' including an intriguing synopsis of the story, information about the author, all the necessary data about the book (publication date, ISBN number, toll free ordering number, price, imprint) and a personal number to contact Griffith for interviews and signings. Especially aimed at reviewers, Griffith also composed a piece which positioned *Ammonite* within the larger feminist SF tradition - an effort to alert reviewers and critics to the fact that *Ammonite* was 'a conscious work' which deserved serious consideration. In the promotional leaflet she writes:

I am tired of token women being strong in a man's world by taking on male attributes: strutting around in black leather, spike heels and killing people...I am equally tired of women-only worlds where all the characters are wise, kind, beautiful, stern seven-foot-tall vegetarian amazons who would never dream of killing anyone. I am tired of reading about aliens who are really women, and women who are really aliens (Griffith, promotional sheet).

In this way, Griffith situates her book within a tradition of feminist SF and provides critics with a ready context for comment and comparison. The brief leaflet also succeeded in disseminating to bookstores and reviewers precisely what Griffith wanted them to *think* about the book. For example, at one point she says: "A women-only world, it seems to me, would shine with the entire spectrum of human behaviour: there would be capitalists and collectivists,

hermits and clan members, sailors and cooks, idealists and tyrants..." (Griffith, promotional sheet). In other words, she was suggesting to reviewers, booksellers, owners and buyers, the 'preferred' meaning of the text.

Griffith's personal promotional efforts - sanctioned but not funded by Del Rey - were aimed specifically at gay and lesbian bookstores, at feminist bookstores and at specialty SF bookstores. A few months before publication, Ellen Harris was 'persuaded' to photocopy the first four chapters of the manuscript and send them, accompanied by the promotional leaflet designed by Griffith and Eskridge, to reviewers, critics, booksellers, etc. (Griffith interview). Evidently, distributing part of the manuscript to reviewers and critics was not endorsed by Del Rey, because Griffith tells me that only four chapters were sent because Harris "could not get away with doing the whole manuscript" using Del Rey facilities. Harris also helped by promoting Griffith's book in other ways. The first issue of the *DRIN* (February 1993) features an in-depth article about *Ammonite*, using much of the same material printed in the promotional leaflet. Harris also promoted the book through word of mouth to her colleagues in the field and distributed copies to fellow workers to read. In the end, all these efforts paid off. Griffith's career was ultimately launched with the help of these promotional efforts:

This got me a bunch of reviews, and some serious hand-selling in feminist book shops - plus the nomination (and eventually the award) for the Lambda Literary Award. Much of that would not

have happened without the determined work by me, Kelley, and Ellen. (Griffith interview).

Thus, despite Del Rey's policies denying publicity and marketing attention to mass market originals, *Ammonite* received much critical acclaim and sold better than most first novels. Harris attributes these higher sales partly to great reviews (Harris interview). When Griffith finished her second novel, *Slow River*, Del Rey took notice. It printed the book in hardcover and assigned Griffith a publicist.

Reviews

Review galleys are just one of the many promotional efforts used by publishers to promote their new titles. Generally speaking, the publisher's advertising or publicity department sends out advance copies of the book to a select group of reviewers and publications. Once they reap the rewards of their efforts, they distribute copies of those reviews to an even larger list, in order to generate excitement about the book. When the book is printed in mass paperback or trade, as the case may be, quotations from those reviews may appear on the new cover. For instance, the front cover of *Mists* sports an excerpt from *The New York Times Book Review* and the back cover lists four other favourable citations (please see Appendix B for illustrations).

Advance quotations are slightly different than reviews. Usually they are solicited from well-known authors before the book cover is even printed so that they may appear on the first printing. The first issue of *Ammonite*, for example, is graced with quotations from Vonda McIntyre and Tim Powers on the back cover, while the reissue also features praise from Ursula Le Guin (see Appendix B). Harris talks about the role of these quotations in convincing reviewers to pay serious attention to the work of new authors: "It not only helps the book in the eyes of the reader, it also helps reviewers who want to know why they should spend their reviewing time on it" (Harris in Killheffer, 1993: 25). The theory behind soliciting quotations is simply to provide a link between a familiar author and a new one. Ellen Harris sums it up succinctly: "If Ursula Le Guin likes Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite*, and you like Ursula K. Le Guin's novels, you'll probably like *Ammonite* too." (Harris, 1993e).

Both *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite* were well received by reviewers and critics. In an advance review printed in 1982, *Mists* was hailed as a "remarkable work of fiction on a par with T.H. White's *Once and Future King*" (*Booklist*, 1982: 409). While some feminist critics might protest a value judgment based on the work of a male author, the comparison to White's work here is a legitimate one given the significant contribution of each book to Arthurian fiction. *Mists* received equally favourable reviews from *Publisher's*

Weekly and *The New York Times Book Review*, both of which appeared on the cover of the trade paperback published by Del Rey (see Appendix B). More recently, Dani Zweig posted a review of Bradley's work on the internet and called it a "rare thing, a retelling of the Arthurian legend which is original enough and skillful enough to be interesting" (Zweig, 1993). He warns Arthurian and historical purists away from it, however, because of its fantastic elements and its "morality play with a twentieth-century agenda" (Zweig, 1993).

Ammonite was praised for its "impeccable characterization" (Barrett, 1993: 47) in *New Statesman and Society*. In *The Los Angeles Times*, Sallis calls it a "remarkable first novel" (Sallis, 1993: 2). The *New York Times Book Review* was equally laudatory, saying that Griffith's "polemical concerns never unbalanced the story" (Jonas, 1993: 14). Although Griffith agrees that nearly all the reviews of the book were very positive, she remarks that many of the critics missed the point of the story. She mentions one review in *Locus* which she said "left me honestly unable to decide whether to laugh or cry" (Griffith interview). Dan Chow, the reviewer, wrote: "How much more complex and rich might *Ammonite* have been if Marghe had had a brother, also abandoned by both parents, or if her father had been exposed to the Jeep virus" (Chow, 1991: 27). Griffith interprets Chow's comments as an attack on the political message underlying the story; that women are human and complete, without men:

In other words: the suffering of women doesn't count, they're not real people. Gee, I thought, what kind of a reaction would he have got if he'd said: 'Gosh, this nice book by Toni Morrison is all very well, but think how much more interesting it would have been if there had been some nice white people in it. (Griffith interview).

Despite some critics who read the book as a 'lesbian coming out' story or as a radical assault on men, the largely flattering reviews of *Ammonite* certainly contributed to high sales and, as noted by Griffith, to obtaining grants from the Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs.

Good reviews, says Griffith, create a reputation and begin a chain of recognition which leads to grants, better advances and royalties and ultimately, better sales. Her final words about reviews were: "And really good writers who don't get onto the ascending threads simply won't make it" (Griffith interview). Certainly Griffith seized those ascending threads; and the fact that she was a woman and lesbian did not seem to matter at all. I wonder if it would have been so easy for her fifteen years ago.

Cover Art

Even more important than the words which appear on the covers, be they quotations from well-known authors, listings of awards or a brief synopsis of the story, the cover art essentially determines whether or not the reader will even notice the book in the first place. However, authors rarely have any choice in the matter of the book cover. Marion Zimmer Bradley was fortunate enough to have

her novel graced by a beautiful cover designed by Braldt Braldis (see Appendix B). In trying to explain the consistent appeal of *Mists*, Harris names the 'gorgeous cover' as a significant factor. Since its first printing in hardcover by Knopf, the cover art for *Mists* has remained the same. And now that the book is recognized as a classic of the field, Del Rey would not dare change it.

As a beginning author, Griffith was not given the attention merited by big selling authors. In choosing the original cover art for *Ammonite*, the decision of Ballantine's Publisher, Linda Grey, overruled any suggestions presented by Ellen Key Harris (the editor who 'discovered' the book and who was in charge of its publication) and Nicola Griffith herself. In my interview with Griffith, she told me that she strongly disliked the generic cover of *Ammonite* at its first printing (please see Appendix B for illustration) and that the final decision was not made by the editor, but by the Publisher of Ballantine Books:

In my opinion it was designed to say: 'Hey, you, yes you the spotty thirteen year-old boy, this is another of those crappy skiffy things that your English teacher and your parents would toss in the garbage if they found you reading it.' I loathe it frankly...Ellen Harris and I fought for a better cover but Linda Grey, the Publisher of Ballantine, took one look at the sketch and said: 'What's that bloody shell doing there? This is SF, put a space ship on the front.' Her word, of course, is law. (Griffith, 1996).

Cover art is seen by many retailers and writers as one of the book's main selling points. Patricia Caven claims that 95 per cent of her customers buy books by the

cover. With reference to cover art, she adds: "I know when a book comes in, when it hits the shelf, if it's going to be a tougher sale." (Caven, 1996). Similarly, Ellen Harris says that "many good books languish on the shelves because their covers are too run-of-the-mill or too poorly done to attract that first spark of interest" (Harris, 1993b).

Unfortunately, the cover art of many feminist SF novels often misrepresents or does not reflect the book's content. Even worse, the genre's traditional scantily-clad Amazonian space women sometimes appear on the covers of feminist SF novels, or novels with strong female protagonists. That is not to say that mainstream SF books suffer a fate any less humiliating. Spaceships, planets, aliens, dragons and wizards are part and parcel of the genre and have come to operate as a sort of flag system to SF readers. And, as is obvious with *Ammonite*, cover art is usually left to the discretion of the publisher, and sometimes not even the editor with a special interest in the book can exercise much influence in the choice.

Once *Ammonite* had proven itself by garnering good reviews and sales and by winning two SF awards, Del Rey relented and reprinted the book with the cover art idea originally proposed by Griffith and Harris. The new *Ammonite* cover, much more appropriate and meaningful to the story itself, was designed to match the cover of Nicola Griffith's second novel, *Slow River*, which was

published in hardcover at the same time (see Appendix B). Speaking for Del Rey, Harris says "We knew the book deserved a second chance with a more 'adult,' less pulpy cover" (Harris, 1995). At the level of the bookstore, Patricia Caven confirmed that the new cover of *Ammonite* helped sell the book more easily: "It stands out, it's a very different cover and certainly when I show it to people and say I really recommend this book, I can see the interest in the cover" (Caven, 1996).

Attractive cover art, then, is a crucial element in marketing a novel, and according to Caven, makes quite a difference in the response of her customers to *Ammonite*. In the words of Ellen Harris, "a good cover can get a book over that initial hurdle: getting noticed at all" (Harris, 1993b). If only SF publishers were not so driven to proclaim their genre status with spaceships and dragons, their books might get noticed by readers outside their limited and specialized market. With *Ammonite*, Del Rey took a chance on a more appropriate/less SF-like cover the second time around, and did not make the same mistake with Griffith's new novel.

Bookstore Level

In tracing the lives of these two texts, I felt it important to include an analysis of their existence once shipped from the printing warehouse. The role of the retailer in promoting specific books through recommendations or of the clerk

in displaying the book in the store are also crucial stages in the process of production and distribution. Although seemingly trivial, shelf placement is considered very important in the publishing industry. Harris describes promotional efforts which include everything from free T-shirts and bookmarks to conversations with the truck drivers who deliver books to non-bookstore outlets:

Sometimes the authors even meet with the truck drivers who deliver the books to grocery stores, drug stores and other non-bookstore outlets; those drivers are often the people in charge of loading the books into the stores' racks, and they end up choosing whose books get put at eye level and whose get more rack spots than others. Publishers suspect that doughnuts and coffee with a big author can mean a difference in an author's rack placement. (Harris, 1994c).

The shelf placement for *Mists* and *Ammonite*, however, was not in the hands of truck drivers, but in those of bookstore clerks; these two texts were distributed only to bookstores - mainstream and specialty. And although the clerk in a general bookstore or chain-owned bookstore displays the book, the specialty store clerk or owner plays a much larger part in promoting specific books.

Patricia Caven is co-owner of Ottawa's specialty SF bookstore - The House of Speculative Fiction - and, for the past twelve years she has spent much of her time talking with customers and recommending books. The store is unique in that it is divided into three sections: science fiction, fantasy and women writers. While many people assume this segregation of female authors was instigated by

Patricia herself because of her sex and her identification as a feminist, she maintains that the store had already been structured as such when she took over the ownership. Ironically enough, she has found that her SF customers don't like change. "I spend a lot of time talking to my customers and I found that the only people who objected to a female author section tended to be older men, whereas many of the younger men said that it didn't really matter" (Caven interview). She suggests that rather than highlighting women authors, the female author section is mostly a convenience to customers who have been shopping regularly at the store for years and who like to know where to find their favourite authors.

Her belief that SF readers are particularly interested in learning about writers also inspires her speculation about other reasons why the female author section is popular with her clients: "I've often wondered if it's just that many people who read science fiction and fantasy like to know about their authors. So the sex is important just as the background is, whether it's if they live in the states or Canada, if they're married..." (Caven interview). In this sense, she must stay up to date on the information available about new authors. In talking about Nicola Griffith to her customers, for instance, Caven includes information about her awards for *Ammonite*, her marriage to Kelley Eskridge and her struggle to stay in the U.S..

Caven's position as store owner means that many of her customers depend on her recommendations in selecting new reading material. While she reads approximately eighty-five per cent of incoming material, she admits that the sheer number of SF books being published in recent years makes it very difficult to stay current on new titles and authors. For this reason, she feels it doubly important that she, at least, is able to act as a certifier for her customers:

With the glut of material that has come on the market in the past ten years, I think you do need to spend time helping people, point things out. And in the book business, we return our books for exactly what we pay for them, so there's no point in lying to a customer when they come through the door. (Caven interview)

So, how does Caven choose which books make her recommendation list?¹⁸ As criteria for good books, she alludes to a rite of passage, a quest which compels the reader to follow the main characters through their learning experiences; books that make the reader think about the issues they have raised (Caven interview). One of Caven's recommendations was *Ammonite*. If it had failed to live up to her expectations, if it had been poorly written or if it had not been well-thought out, however, she said would have foregone any special mention of it. Fortuitously for Nicola Griffith and Del Rey Books, Caven found the book worthy. In fact, I, myself, originally purchased the book at her suggestion.

¹⁸ Caven's recommendations are also available at The House of Speculative Fiction web page at <<http://www.cyberus.ca/specfic/>>

While Caven confided that she hated Arthurian legend, she admitted to enjoying *The Mists of Avalon*. *Mists*, she said, is still one of her most consistent sellers - always well-stocked. Recommendations are consequently hardly needed to increase awareness or knowledge of this book. Through word of mouth, *Mists* has surpassed the selling level of most fantasy books and has become a monumental novel in feminist and Arthurian fantasy.

Caven's recommendations are not carelessly or ignorantly given. She spends much of her time talking with customers, getting to know them and learning their reading habits so she can point out those titles which she thinks will interest them. In this sense, the same books are not recommended to everyone. In the case of *Ammonite*, Caven suggested it to women who liked strong female characters and who had expressed an interest in anthropology, gender issues, and cultural settings. While Caven felt she could safely suggest *Ammonite* to one quarter of her female customers, her instinct told her that another twenty-five percent, mostly fantasy readers, would find the book too polemical.

But not only did Caven recommend *Ammonite* to women, but to many of her male customers as well. She felt comfortable doing so because she said it was less 'anti-male' than some feminist SF (she mentions the work of Russ as a point of comparison). In other words, men could enjoy the novel because they need

not approach it with trepidation or defensiveness. In Caven's mind, as a feminist and as a bookstore owner, selling books - selling *ideas* - is inextricably linked to education. She says:

One of the reasons I enjoy doing what I do is because I consider what I do to be part of an education process which is to open people's eyes to different ideas. You know if I can give a book like *Ammonite* to some redneck who hasn't really thought about it and he comes back and is really amazed that a society could be set up like this...it's interesting. (Caven interview)

Thus Caven is deliberately cooperating in a subversive effort. In another statement, she applauds feminist SF which avoids polemical attacks on men and which addresses itself to both sexes: "There's no point in my mind of preaching to the converted, which is what you're doing if you're only talking to a feminist audience...*if we want any changes to be made, we have to talk to men too*" (emphasis added; Caven interview). As evidenced by her concern for varying degrees of polemic in feminist SF, Caven perceives herself as a part of the feminist project to reconstruct or dismantle gender categories through cultural intervention. In other words, she sees SF as something that can make a difference in feminist materialist aims. Caven's conscious decision to introduce readers, both male and female, to subversive ideas corroborates my assertion that as theorists and researchers, we must look beyond the text to assess its seditious potential. After all, some people may not even have encountered the world of Jeep had it not been for Caven's intervention.

From rough manuscript to the hands of the consumer, this chapter has traced the institutions and forces governing the production of *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite*. Cultural texts are unique in that they are marketed and consumed as any other commercial product, but embody ideas. Hence, this analysis focused on the selling of feminist ideas and the political and commercial forces to which those ideas are subjected: their editing, their packaging, their recognition. Unfortunately, the scope and length of this project does not allow for an examination of every operation involved in making a manuscript into a finished cultural product. I was unable to address, for instance, the role of literary agents, sales agents and printers in the process of production and negotiation of meaning.

Details of the context in which both *Mists* and *Ammonite* were produced, marketed and recommended have shed new light on their subversive potential. How subversive is a feminist text marketed to an audience already accustomed to similar texts? How does the text of *Ammonite* differ from its feminist SF predecessors and does this difference enlarge its subversive potential? How has the extended market reach of *Mists* affected its capacity to undermine patriarchal religion? Does the perception of *Mists* as a romance render it more acceptable to a general readership? As demonstrated here, the intersection of commercial and political goals is one full of tension and contradiction. These questions will be addressed more fully in the last chapter of this study which focuses primarily on

the readers and their interaction with the text. My own interpretation of these texts however follows.

Encoding Meanings and Interpreting Texts

Underlying the attempt to assess the role of feminist SF in the feminist political project - or I would argue, in diverse feminist projects - is the assumption that fiction is a valid mode for materialist intervention. Cultural texts are sites of struggle over meaning and discourse, where the binding categories of gender are constructed, contested and negotiated. Gerardine Meany sees the cultural domain as "an area with the potential for wide-ranging changes which will have an impact in every other domain of power" (Meany, 1993: 3). She suggests that women coming to writing is "necessary to revolutionary change in the nature of gender and power" (Meany, 1993: 3). Women must exert some influence in the cultural sphere where categories of femininity and masculinity are constructed if they are to redefine them to their own liking. Struggling at the level of discourse and meaning is not superfluous or elusive, it is deeply connected to the various material conditions of oppression experienced by women. Indeed, Janet Wolff insists that cultural politics is not only valuable as one contested area among many, but is "a vital enterprise, located at the heart of the complex order which reproduces sexual divisions in society" (Wolff, 1990: 1). Women writers, from Virginia Woolf to Joanna Russ, have understood the crucial relationship of language to power and have striven to make their own voices heard.

In writing, women valorize their own experiences and create a space to articulate their concerns, to reshape notions of gender, class and race, to imagine alternatives to patriarchy. Hélène Cixous describes writing as "...precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures"(Cixous in Meany, 1993: 3). My argument here essentially posits that feminist SF is particularly appropriate for envisioning alternative possibilities for women. In fact, much feminist theory manifests a notable utopian tendency - it is after all in the business of proposing alternatives to existing social structures. Patricia Dunker expresses this relationship between feminist SF and theory: "A utopian vision is a necessary element in all feminist thought... To imagine a radically different world for women is to imagine a radically different world"(Dunker, 1992: 99). And where are radically different worlds more apparent and literal than in speculative fiction?

I am wary, however, of Robin Robert's assertion that feminist separatist utopias provide "blueprints for the future"(Roberts, 1993: 69). The alternative realities in separatist utopias are often dependent on factors such as the nuclear annihilation of planet Earth with few survivors, the presence of a deadly disease which kills almost the entire population or the distant futuristic notion of planet colonies. At present, these are not realistic premises on which to base a vision of

the future. The point, I think, of imagining worlds with no men is not to suggest separatism as a feasible solution to the problems of oppression, but to comment on the state of our society and suggest different ways to think about it. In other words, fantastic literature - and by this I mean the speculative nature of all SF - is completely dependent on reality for its existence. Jacqueline Pearson suggests that fantasy "can depict a culture very minutely through its desires, its anxieties and its repressions" (Pearson, 1990: 9). Similarly, Rosemary Jackson argues that "fantasy traces the unsaid and unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent" (Jackson, 1981: 178).

Speculative fiction, then, proves useful in dealing with the politics of gender and is especially meaningful for articulating the desires and dreams of repressed groups in society. And although we cannot assume the same experience of oppression for all women, we cannot completely dismiss the prospect of a cooperative emancipatory effort either, or the fact that the voices and dreams of women have long been suppressed. Why SF? Because it allows women to step outside the constraints of a world where women are the invisible and devalued 'others.' Feminist SF writers are not limited to patriarchal realities, they are free to explore a myriad of alternative possibilities and impossibilities in creating a space for women. In this sense, I am following the example of the many SF theorists writing before me by suggesting that the estrangement factor

of SF gives it more subversive potential than mainstream fiction. As Sarah

Lefanu points out:

Unlike other forms of genre writing, such as detective stories and romances, which demand the reinstatement of order and thus can be described as 'closed' texts, science fiction is by its nature interrogative, open. Feminism questions a given order in political terms, while science fiction questions it in imaginative terms. (Lefanu, 1988: 100).

This chapter will examine the second element in the cultural negotiation of meaning: the text. I have divided the chapter into two distinct areas of analysis: encoding meaning and interpreting texts. The first of these is devoted to the context of creation. In other words, I will be considering the context in which *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite* were conceived: the personal histories of Marion Zimmer Bradley and Nicola Griffith, their conception of writing as a force in cultural politics and their intent in writing the story. Understanding the author's motivations is obviously crucial in determining whether or not feminist SF is to be considered a subversive genre. However, I am not suggesting that meaning is encoded by the author only to be decoded as such by the reader, for I have elsewhere made clear the complex process by which meaning is negotiated. I only wish to assess this particular level in the process of creating meaning.

In the second part of this chapter, I will present my own analysis of *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite*. I want to stress my position as just one reader among many; the interpretation presented here will be complemented, in the last

chapter, by the renditions of numerous other readers. My own analysis will be set within the framework of recent debates in feminist theory which interrogate the coalition of feminism and postmodernism. Not only do *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite* represent two diverse examples of feminist SF, they also illustrate the problematic relationship that feminism has with postmodernism. While I would argue that some female authors are embracing post-structuralist ideas to help them in their quest to deconstruct patriarchal meta-narratives, I contest Robert's assertion that feminist SF is, in effect, postmodern. There are too many contradictions inherent in such a classification, as will become evident.

For those readers unfamiliar with the two specific texts under scrutiny, I offer a brief synopsis of their plots before beginning my analysis.

Text Synopses

The Mists of Avalon (1982)¹ - Marion Zimmer Bradley

Marion Zimmer Bradley situates her Arthurian tale in a time when Christianity is sweeping across the British Isles, but the worship of the Goddess still holds sway with many natives. The rivalry between the powers of Avalon, the seat of matriarchal religion, and the new rising strength of patriarchal Christianity provides the framework for the retelling of the legend of Arthur from a female perspective. Morgaine, traditionally portrayed as the evil and

¹ I am assuming a basic knowledge of the Arthurian legend here.

manipulative half-sister to Arthur,² becomes for Bradley, the embodiment of positive female power as she pits herself against the forces which will suppress women's experience (Tobin, 1993: 150). As a priestess and later, High Priestess of Avalon, she devotes her life to preserving the influence of the Goddess in Britain. The events of the Arthurian tale which traditionally cast Morgan the Fay as the evil sorceress and Arthur's enemy are rewritten in Bradley's account in ways which contextualize her motivations and legitimize her actions.

For example, the incestuous liaison between Arthur and Morgaine is manipulated, not by Morgaine herself, but by Viviane, High Priestess of Avalon, who wishes to bind the crown of Britain to the forces of Avalon by ensuring an heir for Arthur of the Old Blood. At Viviane's bidding, Arthur and Morgaine participate in the rites of the Great Marriage with the Land; that is, the King Stag lies with the Virgin Huntress. Separated since early childhood and overwhelmed by the powers of the deities within them, they are ignorant of each other's identities until it is too late. Mordred is conceived and eventually plays out his own role in the pagan ritual by confronting the King Stag in his own turn.

Although definitely the protagonist, Morgaine is not alone in retelling the legend. From conception until death, Arthur's life is seen through the eyes of the

² For example, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan the Fay engineers the cruel test of Sir Gawain (in Wilhelm and Gross, 1984: 207). Similarly, Sir Thomas Malory portrays Morgan le Fay as a sorceress who steals the scabbard from Arthur, seduces him through magic to conceive the son who will destroy him and plots to kill her own husband, Uriens (Malory, 1969: 138).

women around him. In fact, the portrayal of Arthur is superficial and simplistic. His presence shapes the story, but he is never seen taking action to control events; the women are at the loom, weaving the threads of everyone's destiny. The power behind the throne is female, not male. Viviane not only manipulates Arthur and Morgaine, she also coerces her sister Igraine into lying with Uther to conceive Arthur himself. Morgaine creates with her own hands and magical power, the scabbard which keeps Arthur unharmed in battle and secures his place on the throne. Even Gwenhwyfar, a "thoroughly priest-ridden and uptight Christian lady" (Fry, 1993: 73), precipitates the downfall of King Arthur by urging him incessantly to break his ties with Avalon and serve only the Christian God. When Arthur finally yields to his wife's demands and breaks his oath to Avalon, Morgaine opposes him only to protect her own religious vision and that of her people.

Although all the elements of the Arthurian legend are present and predictable - from the adulterous love between Gwenhwyfar and Lancelet, to the final battle between Mordred and his father - Mists reinterprets the story to valorize women's experience and deconstruct the patriarchal meta-narrative of Christianity. Bradley makes evident the misogynistic character of Christianity and provides a model for women based on the worship of the Mother Goddess.

Ammonite (1992) - Nicola Griffith

In one of the classic narrative traditions of science fiction, *Ammonite* tells the story of Marghe Taishan, anthropologist for Durallium Company, who sets out on the lonely task of studying the population of an alien planet; except that the people on Grenchstom's Planet - GP or Jeep - are human. They are the remnants of the original colonists who landed there centuries ago. The Virus native to the planet killed most of the original colonists - all the men and most of the women - but the women who did survive formed the base of the varied communities populating Jeep when Marghe arrives.

Segregated from the native population is Port Central, a military community of "Mirrors," the surviving women officers of a Company force recently sent to Jeep to exploit its resources. Company has delayed their withdrawal from the planet for fear of contamination and the remaining crew members are in various states of acculturation to life on Jeep. Although Marghe's allegiance to Company is questionable and her personal goal as an anthropologist is to uncover the secret of reproduction on Jeep, her assignment as a SEC representative is to test the vaccine, FN-17, against the deadly planetary Virus. If the vaccine works, Company can reclaim the planet for exploitation and colonization. The fate of the people on Jeep, however, may be disastrous if FN-17 proves ineffective against the Virus.

Marghe's journey on Jeep is one of self-discovery as well as physical adventure. Through the trials of captivity and escape in the harsh winter of the north, she learns the pulse of the planet. She comes to terms with her past and with herself. Having learned to control the rhythms of her own body through meditative techniques, Marghe survives the frozen wasteland and enters a community where she finally feels at home. But her brush with death leads her to understand that the Virus is inextricably linked to the life of the planet.

Marghe finally finds a family, a community and falls in love with a native woman. Once gone 'native,' she consciously stops taking FN-17 and risks death at the hands of the Virus. When she recovers, her self-definition as an anthropologist is replaced by a new harmony with the planet. Her deepsearch ritual reveals her new identity: she becomes Marghe Amun, the complete one. In becoming pregnant with her lover, Marghe discovers that the Virus is the secret to reproduction on Jeep; it physically alters the women to permit parthenogenesis. In choosing to become a *viajera* (bard, healer), Marghe also discovers that the Virus provides a link to the memories of the beings who inhabited the planet before the arrival of the humans.

Not one male character is present throughout *Ammonite*. And yet, the exclusion of men is not justified by anger or fear; it is explained by the neutral factor of the Virus. Nor is their absence missed or lamented. The story remains

compelling and complete because the women of Jeep make up a varied and rich population; they are simply people. Upon reflection, it is somewhat surprising and disconcerting to realize that a novel without men is seen as radically feminist. The following excerpt from Pamela Sargent's introduction to *Women of Wonder* is worth quoting here:

It is a bit odd that readers should feel threatened by a story in which well-characterised, likable women can get along without men, when there is such an abundance of science fiction in which well-characterised likable men get along without women. (Sargent in Barr, 1993: 40).

Besides the unrepentant absence of men, Marghe's homosexuality never becomes an issue of contention in the novel. *Ammonite* does not become a story of one woman coming to terms with her sexuality. Nicola Griffith explains why she omitted initial clarification of Marghe's sexual preference in the book: "One of the reasons I didn't mention Marghe's sexual history before landing on Jeep was that it was not necessary to the story...I just assumed she was a dyke, and went on from there" (Griffith in van de Kruisweg, 1994). In brief, the novel explores women as complete beings - without reference to gender or sexual orientation as social constraints.

Encoding Meaning

However divergent in style and intention, I have classified both *Mists* and *Ammonite* as feminist SF. My reasons for doing so are based upon my own

interpretation of these texts and the interpretation of other scholars and critics who have made similar claims about them. The following investigation, however, is aimed particularly at acknowledging the importance of the creator's intentions. How closely do the intentions of the writer relate to the interpretation of the text by the reader?

Getting Lost in the Mists: Diverging Intent and Reception

Marion Zimmer Bradley is recognized by many women SF writers as a mentor and a role model. Just this year, an anthology called *Return to Avalon* (1996) was published in honour of Bradley's *Mists*, with contributions from many of the top writers in fantasy.³ Aside from short stories harking back to Bradley's setting in *Mists*, some writers included notes of appreciation to Bradley for her support and influence. Jennifer Roberson writes that Bradley "...has never been a coward, or 'politically correct,' nor is she a fool to let others tell her how to think. She is what she is" (Roberson, 1996: 394). So, what is Marion Zimmer Bradley? How does she see herself as a writer and as a woman? Besides entertainment and self-fulfillment, what are her goals in writing fiction about women, for women? What message did she want to convey in *Mists*?

³ They include Jennifer Roberson, Judith Tarr, Melanie Rawn, Katherine Kerr, Susan Schwartz, Charles De Lint and Elizabeth Waters among others. Some of these writers also began their careers in the pages of *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* or in Darkover fandom.

As evidenced by the publication of *Return to Avalon* and the eloquent praise of the collaborators therein, Bradley has certainly contributed to liberal feminist projects by supporting and encouraging new women writers in SF and exerting her editorial influence in the field, if nothing else. And yet, Bradley has long shunned classification as a feminist. Nor does she believe in fiction as a valid form for championing feminist causes - or any other causes, for that matter. In reference to Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, Bradley writes: "I personally don't think novels should be didactic and I don't like the idea of an author preaching in her novels...I am definite that a novel is a world where the author should never intrude and should make her point only by artistry" (Bradley, 1985a: 34). Indeed, Bradley's main concerns as a writer seem to be limited mostly to aesthetics and commercial viability.

In the beginning of her career until 1970, as is evident in much of the Darkover series, Bradley restricted herself to writing about male protagonists. As a commercial writer, her first object was to get published and to sell books; and to accomplish that, she believed she had to cater to the demands of the marketplace:

I realized that if I were going to write for anyone's edification other than my own, I would have to write novels with heroes rather than heroines. This was simply the rules of the game, the economic facts of life in the market. (Bradley, 1977: 35).

Despite her early misgivings about female protagonists, Bradley's writing has since developed a noticeable feminist sensitivity. Needless to say, the climate of the book market has also radically changed since the 1950s to facilitate the publication of novels featuring female protagonists and exploring women's experiences.

In the seventies, Bradley's Darkover novels began to reveal a genuine concern for women's issues and gay/lesbian rights. In *The Shattered Chain* (1979), Bradley introduces the Free Amazons, a guild of female renunciates who reject the patriarchal practices of Darkover, and in *The Forbidden Tower* (1977) and *The Heritage of Hastur* (1977), she addresses issues of male homosexuality with complexity and realism (Riemer, 1986: 148). But Linda Leith notes with curiosity that Bradley "is far happier to deal with a man's homo- or bi-sexuality than a woman's" (Leith, 1980: 30). Lancelet's devotion to Gwenhwyfar in *Mists*, for instance, is explained by his unacknowledged homosexuality - his real attraction is to Arthur. Bradley interprets Lancelet's character in this way: "And how would you better excuse or underline your interest in women, than by proclaiming enormous devotion to the one woman you cannot have?" (Bradley in Godwin, 1984: 7). Lancelet's expressed dedication to the queen is truly a pretext for his love of Arthur. Arthur, Gwenhwyfar and Lancelet participate in a three-way sexual encounter in *Mists* where the love between Arthur and Lancelet

becomes more than the simple devotion of a knight for his king (Bradley, 1982: 449).

Although she rejects the feminist label, some of Bradley's work is classified by many scholars - and perhaps also by many other readers - as 'feminist.'⁴ Jacqueline Pearson suggests an affinity between Bradley's writing career and the different movements in feminism in the same time period: "Bradley's long career leads from androcentrism to feminism to 'post-feminism,' and thus economically reflects trends in society and mainstream women's writing" (Pearson, 1990: 15). Nickianne Moody calls *The Mists of Avalon* "a distinct fantasy novel with a keen feminist insight" (Moody, 1991: 191). I myself have classified *Mists* as feminist SF. And yet, Bradley insists: "I do not write for political reasons." (Bradley, 1985a: 37). Indeed, many writers - most especially writers of fiction - write primarily for the pleasure of telling a story.

Nonetheless, feminist SF, more than any other genre, explores alternatives to existing social constraints and diffuses feminist ideals in an accessible, popular

⁴ Anne Cranny-Francis calls *The Shattered Chain*:

a feminist fantasy novel which argues the need for women to have choice about the kind of life they lead. And in demanding choice for women, the novel necessarily demands also that women be treated as autonomous subjects, not passive objects, which is a fundamental challenge to patriarchy. (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 81-82).

Sarah Lefanu, however, disagrees with the classification of *The Shattered Chain* as feminist. She says that "inscribed in all her [Bradley's] novels,... is a warning to women: avoid too much power or you will sacrifice the love of men; and a plea to men for love and understanding" (Lefanu, 1988: 45). Even further, she says Bradley's "female characters, on whom her reputation as a feminist writer rests, all knuckle under the notional Man" (Lefanu, 1988: 45). Lefanu even calls *The Ruins of Isis* an "anti-feminist book" (Lefanu, 1988: 44).

culture format. We must assume, therefore, that feminist SF writers share a concern for feminist issues, aim to express those concerns through their fiction and render them visible to their readers. Suzy McKee Charnas, for example, explains her own goals in writing feminist SF: "We keep trying to do something better in our heads...because if you can imagine it, maybe somebody can do part of it, anyway. You like to think it gives people something to aim for" (Charnas in Phillips, 1994: 73). Russ and Charnas, in particular, have used the genre to channel their rage and to envision alternatives to patriarchy.

Bradley, however, stresses the responsibility of the writer to "serve the whole population of the readership" and to "tell a good story" above all else (Bradley, 1985a: 36-37).⁵ Why, then, have various critics and readers decided that *Mists* carries a political message when Bradley insists that she did not intentionally incorporate one in its creation? I would suggest that we cannot infer the meaning of a cultural text by examining only the intentions of its originator. Readers and critics have interpreted *Mists* in the context of their own beliefs and their own perceptions of the world.

⁵ In defending herself against accusations of being unable to cope with a separatist utopia, Bradley repeatedly refers to Russ's *The Female Man* as a foil to her own writing. "I must say sales figures are ample vindication; *Shattered Chain* has been read, and thought about, by men and women who would have pitched the more classically (and politically correct) feminist tract *The Female Man* across the room" (Bradley, 1988: 94). She says something remarkably similar in her article "Responsibilities and Temptations of Women Science Fiction Writers" (1985) on page 34.

Bradley's treatment of Christianity and Paganism in the novel, for instance, can be seen as a point of contention between author and reader. The popularity of the Neo Pagan religious movement⁶ in recent years certainly provides an important point of reference for the interpretation of *Mists*. Carrol L. Fry examines neo-pagan witchcraft in *Mists* and concludes that Bradley "must be a Neo Pagan" and remains surprised to discover in an interview with Bradley herself that she is actually a practicing Christian (Fry, 1993: 76). Fry's incredulity translates into an open accusation that Bradley is deceiving her readership and hiding her true religious beliefs:⁷

I suspect, and my Pagan contacts agree, that we have to take Bradley's comments about not being a Neo Pagan with a grain of salt. Authors are notoriously cagey about referring to their own beliefs and their works, and I sensed some of that authorial reserve in our interview. (Fry, 1993: 77).

Although I did not interview Bradley myself, other sources corroborate her assertions about being a Christian⁸ and I cannot see why she would repeatedly lie about her religious preference for the benefit of the academic community or her readership. And yet, the underlying theme in *Mists* is one of rivalry between

⁶ Neo paganism can best be described as a movement to reclaim the worship of the Goddess, the Earth Mother and her consort, the Horned God. For a detailed description of neo-paganism, see *The Spiral Dance* (1979) by Starhawk.

⁷ If I sound skeptical of Fry's credibility, it is because she consistently misspells Bradley's name throughout her essay: an oversight which gives me the impression of lack of research and interest.

⁸For instance in Godwin (1984) and Bradley in Du Pont (1988). Bradley also often makes reference to God in interviews and articles about her work.

Christianity and Paganism, with the protagonist clearly on the Pagan side. It is not difficult to imagine how one might assume Bradley's Pagan inclination.

How, then, do we reconcile the differences in intention and reception which are evident in the cultural negotiation of meaning of *Mists* and Bradley's other works? The novel's conclusion may prove enlightening. As in most of her fiction, Bradley's resolution is one of compromise.⁹ In the end, Morgaine loses the battle against Christianity and she accepts that the Goddess has simply been renamed by the Christians; the Pagan Goddess is embodied in the Christian Virgin Mary or Saint Brigid. Linda Leith argues that this conciliatory solution ultimately "leads...to a retreat into conservatism and defeat" (Leith, 1980: 31). Leith seems to be suggesting an alternative ending to the legend only to satisfy a demand for positive female role models. She calls for the feminist equivalent of socialist realism. But the traditional version of the Arthurian legend is, after all, a tragedy. *Mists* is no different in its tragic ending, nor should it be. If *Mists* ends with the defeat of Avalon, so too does the traditional Arthurian story end with the death of King Arthur and all the ideals embodied in Camelot.

Despite Bradley's rejection of radical feminist priorities, she does display an awareness of feminist concerns in her work. She suggests that the

⁹ In Linda Leith's study of Darkover novels, she points out Bradley's tendency to structure her story lines around the reconciliation of contraries between Darkovan and Terran culture. The values of Darkovan culture are in direct opposition to our own, American values (Terran) and can be associated with traditionally 'feminine' traits such as intuition and nature.

responsibilities of women SF writers include providing role models for women in society and criticizing their own societal structures (Bradley, 1985a: 38).

Recreating the old legend of Arthur, she says, was all part of "the great event of the 20th century: the rediscovery of feminine powers" (Bradley in Godwin, 1984:

9). And indeed, Marion Zimmer Bradley has consciously tried to uncover the patriarchal forces behind Christianity as is evident in her own statement about the novel: "Christians tried to create a patriarchal religion without goddesses, but the human spirit demands a world-mother" (Bradley in Godwin, 1984: 6).

Bradley's goal, then, was essentially to unveil the face of the Goddess. Gerardine

Meany suggests that the very project of rewriting the patriarchal myths which

infuse our culture constitutes a feminist effort:

This interrogation of western culture - the relentless revision, the rewriting and undoing of myth, of history, above all of willful consciousness and the fictions (societies, languages, selves) it supports - is a practice shared by novelists. It is also a process in which women writers are now almost inevitably engaged, *whether or not they engage in it as self-conscious feminists*. (emphasis added; Meany, 1993: 10).

In this sense, then, my own interpretation of Bradley's work as feminist is sound.

Certainly for many readers, the act of validating the worship of a female goddess

and a religion which empowers women is a feminist one.

Becoming Human: Living without Men on Jeep

Nicola Griffith's situation differs significantly from Bradley's in that her writing career began in an age where various feminist perspectives were already articulated and accepted to a certain extent in mainstream society.¹⁰ She consciously writes within a tradition of feminist SF, with knowledge of her predecessors and an awareness of her feminist influences. In a discussion about her past reading experiences, Griffith indicates that discovering feminist SF at age nineteen "felt like coming home" (Griffith in van de Kruisweg, 1994).

In my interview with Griffith,¹¹ she indicated that she was proud to place herself within the feminist SF tradition:

Yes, I'm part of it. I have a very conscious knowledge of and debt owed to those who have gone before me. I like to think I'm building upon their work. *Ammonite* would not have existed without Charnas and McIntyre and Russ and Butler and Lynn and Sturgeon [yes! a boy!] et al.

In an interview for Holland SF, she also suggests that she borrowed quite consciously from *The Left Hand of Darkness* in casting Marghe as a lone

¹⁰ Nicola Griffith is also originally from the U.K. She just received approval in 1993 from the US State Department to live and work in that country on the basis of her importance as a writer of lesbian/science fiction. Several members of the science fiction community helped her with her immigration application by writing testimonial letters on her behalf.

¹¹ My interview with Nicola Griffith took place on the internet. For a list of the questions, please see Appendix 1. Her response was sent to me by electronic mail on Friday, January 26, 1996. Due to the nature of electronic sources, I will not be able to reference page numbers. If not otherwise indicated, the quotes included here are excerpts from that interview. My analysis of Griffith's intentions in writing feminist SF will be based almost entirely on her own statements in interviews due to the lack of other sources addressing Griffith and her recent work.

ambassador on another world. Perhaps due to this similarity, *Ammonite* is frequently compared to Le Guin's *Left* (van de Kruisweg, 1994). Griffith, however, seems pleased that her work is considered along with Le Guin's: "But I don't mind the comparisons, in the end, because there is a link between the two books: both were seen as breaking ground when they were published. Both were seen to be both less and more radical than they actually are" (in Kruisweg, 1994). Furthermore, the predominance of snow and ice imagery in her work is something she recognizes as a common motif in feminist SF: "Shelley's 'Frankenstein', Russ, Lessing, Slonczewski, Bryant, Charnas, Piercy, etc. all use the trial-by-ice, Demeter myth in some form or another" (in Kruisweg, 1994).¹²

Griffith, then, firmly positions herself as a feminist, and a particular kind of feminist at that, a lesbian feminist. In marketing and publishing *Ammonite*, she insisted that her lesbianism be made explicit: "It's something I've always been absolutely adamant about to my publishers: 'I want it out there, up front, in big letters: Nicola is a dyke and she lives with her partner in Atlanta'" (in Kruisweg, 1994). When asked about her insistence in this matter, Griffith counters that she feels she would be lying by omission by withholding the information; for people would assume her heterosexuality. Writing about a world without men, then, was a personal as well as a political statement for Nicola Griffith.

¹² Griffith makes explicit reference to Robin Roberts academic study of the Demeter myth in feminist SF; she is evidently also well-versed in feminist SF academic literature.

According to Griffith, the radical subtext of *Ammonite* is quite simple:

"women are people, despite biological sex and socially constructed gender roles" (in Kruisweg, 1994); in other words, "this is how women might be. Period. Not in comparison to/in response to/in the presence of men" (Griffith interview). Admittedly, the assertion that women are human beings with all the complexities and needs of all human beings *should not* be considered radical. It is an indication of the level of misogyny in the genre and in our culture that a book like *Ammonite* is regarded and hailed as radically feminist. When asked about her reasons for writing *Ammonite*, Griffith admits to political motivations as well as personal ones. Her answer, I think, is worth quoting here at length:

I wrote *Ammonite* for two reasons. One was as a direct response to all sex-battle texts...of the fifties on --to answer the subtextual question "Are Women Human?" Two was because...well *Ammonite* was the kind of book for which I had been looking but had never quite found (*The Left Hand of Darkness* was unsatisfactory because they weren't women, per se, but androgynous Gethenians; Russ was too bitter and knotty and full of women and men in struggle; Charnas was a bit too high on the seventies wise-kind-ecologically-aware-lesbian-feminist scale - and, besides, there were only two kinds of women instead of thousands, millions; etc, etc.). So yes, *Ammonite* did have an overt goal, but it also answered a personal need.

Ammonite, indeed presents a world full of women, but also undermines the generalizations and the essentialist tendencies of the feminist separatist utopias which preceded it. Griffith rejects the simplistic oppositional perception of patriarchal societies as inherently violent, and matriarchal ones as nurturing and

cooperative. The communities of women on Jeep are culturally diverse - some nurturing, some more competitive and aggressive. The popular association of women with nature and men with technology is also deconstructed in Griffith's book. Although *Ammonite* is set on a non-technological world, the native women are ingenious in the development of tools, art and agriculture. Technology, even the advanced technological vehicles and weapons employed by the military women at Port Central, is not seen as the antithesis of the more rudimentary technology used by the Jeep natives.

Despite her overt political message in *Ammonite*, Griffith is first and foremost a novelist. As such, she displays an honest concern for the story itself, for wanting her readers "to taste the air I had imagined, to touch the dirt, to watch the restless sea; to hear the songs and feel the river...to wonder what it would really be like to live on a world full of women who struggled to live their lives day after day." But I suspect she would agree that there is nothing wrong with making readers think about the constraints in their own world while they visit her fantastical one.

Interpreting Texts

Explored as a site of tension in recent feminist criticism, the intersection of feminism and postmodernism - or more particularly of feminist SF and postmodernism - is a particularly productive frame of reference for this

discussion of *Mists* and *Ammonite* and their distinct subversive strategies. While I am not suggesting that feminist SF is a postmodern genre, I do contend that some female SF authors are embracing post-structuralist ideas about language and discourse to assist them in deconstructing patriarchal meta-narratives.

At this point, I feel a distinction between form and content an important one to make. In form, narrative style and presentation, neither *Mists* nor *Ammonite* can be considered postmodern. While postmodern aesthetics are characterised by non-linearity and self-reflexiveness (Roberts, 1990: 139), both *Mists* and *Ammonite* follow a traditional narrative style; a linear progression through time and action, and a central narrator who unveils events, feelings and motivations. According to Veronica Hollinger, feminist SF writers "have very little interest in, or affection for the ironic and frequently nihilistic 'playfulness' of the postmodern" (Hollinger, 1993: 275). Although there are definitely some examples, - Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985) and, to a lesser extent, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) - very few works of feminist SF display radical narrative structures which can be characterised as postmodern.

And yet in terms of content, many theorists are hailing science fiction as the ultimate postmodern text, "the dreambook of the age" or "the preeminent literary genre of the postmodern era" (Philmus et al, 1991: 305). Brian McIlale,

for example, defines postmodernism as a focus on ontology, or "being" rather than epistemology, or "knowing." In this sense, human experience of the world is relative and open-ended. For McHale, science fiction is "perhaps *the* ontological genre *par excellence*." (McHale, 1987: 59). He even suggests that science fiction is postmodernism's "non-canonized or 'low art' double, its sister-genre" (McHale, 1987: 59) because, as a genre, it specializes in constructing new worlds and new realities. In the words of Clute and Nicholls: "The Universe itself becomes a text, open to endless interpretation and rewriting" (Clute & Nicholls, 1993: 950).

In her study of feminist SF and postmodernism, Jenny Wolmark argues that science fiction "has been increasingly identified with such postmodernist concerns as the instability of social and cultural categories, the erosion of confidence in historical narratives and a seemingly concomitant inability to imagine the future" (Wolmark, 1994: 7). Indeed Fredric Jameson assigns a reflective, historical function to science fiction, a literature typically known to hold the 'future' as its narrative focus. He argues that SF's purpose is "not to give us 'images' of the future... but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*" (Jameson, 1982: 151). Indeed, Jameson suggests that science and utopian fiction greatly reflect our culture's "constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself" (Jameson, 1982: 153). He finds one of the

defining features of postmodern culture to be a "depthlessness," the disappearance of a sense of history, and its replacement by pastiche and nostalgia. In cyberpunk and virtual realities, he sees the postmodern 'schizophrenic' tendency to dissolve simulation and reality into one another (Clute & Nicholls, 1993: 950). Baudrillard also stresses the melding of reality and imaginary in his concept of the 'simulacrum' and 'hyper-real.' The emphasis on commodification in postmodern culture has erased the distinctions between signs and reality: "signs of the real are substituted for the real itself" (Wolmark, 1994: 12). In this sense, there is no need anymore for fantasy or science fiction, for the hyper-real and the depthlessness of our culture have erased history and the future.

In addition to this imaginative impotence, one of Jameson's principal projects is to demonstrate the dissolution of the boundaries between high and low culture in the postmodern era - a project which enhances the connectivity of science fiction and theory. Marleen Barr's proposed reclassification of feminist SF under the postmodern rubric of 'feminist fabulation' represents just such an effort to legitimize SF as a text worthy of academic attention. (Barr, 1992). Robin Roberts also presents postmodernism as a linking agent in urging scholars to pay serious attention to science fiction: "Applying post-structuralist and post-modern ideas to a mass cultural form reveals that these texts are more complex than

many critics acknowledge" (Roberts, 1990: 138). Although SF has attracted more critical attention in recent years, I suspect this is due more to its growth in popularity and size, its increasingly sophisticated treatment of serious cultural and political issues (largely energized by the growing number of women writers) and the acceptance of popular culture as a respected area for academic study, than its purported affinity to the postmodern canon. In short, I don't think SF needs postmodernism to validate it. Therefore, I am not forcing a postmodern label on a genre which cannot be assimilated so easily into a one restrictive category. I will, however, be examining *Mists* and *Ammonite* in the context of current debates in feminism and postmodernism.

As discussed in chapter one, postmodernism's relationship with feminism is equally, if not more belligerent, than its tenuous liaison with science fiction. At one extreme of these debates is the conflation of both theoretical approaches. Robin Roberts represents this essentialist stance when she asserts that "feminist theory, because of its undermining aims, is a subset of post-modern theory" (Roberts, 1990: 137). Indeed, postmodernism is concerned with the recognition that reality and its organizing categories are socially constructed and, correspondingly, with the abolishment of polarities taken for granted by modernism such as the oppositions of self/other, technology/nature and male/female (Finn, 1993: 125). Many feminist projects are concerned with the

very same efforts. And, feminist SF is seen by many as articulating these very theoretical assumptions in exotic world settings and alternative futures. But even though both feminism and postmodernism engage in challenging patriarchal meta-narratives, I would argue that this similarity does not equate them. The rejection of the essential subject, and the relativistic position inherent in a postmodern stance, contradict many of the material aims of a political project grounded in everyday experiences. Postmodernism does, however, provide a rich theoretical context in which to examine the subversive potential of the genre, and supply many writers with valuable conceptual tools to undermine existing social structures and discourses.

Deconstructing Christianity in The Mists of Avalon

In its treatment of Christianity, *The Mists of Avalon* demonstrates a partiality for Foucault's poststructuralist ideas about the power of discourses and Lyotard's language-games of legitimizing narratives which "define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question" (in Connor, 1989). By deconstructing and making evident the construction of Christianity as a meta-narrative, it opens a space for the articulation of an alternative discourse: women's spirituality and culture. In short, it embodies the very concepts which are argued to conflate strategies of feminism and postmodernism: reactionary

attacks on legitimizing modernist meta-narratives such as science, language and religion.

In acknowledging that gender, language and religion are cultural constructs and exposing them as such, women can work at breaking down previously impenetrable barriers, and dismantling the conceptual cages which imprison them. Cultural texts are foremost in this project. Andreas Huyssen explains that the cultural products of women and other repressed groups are leading elements in the shift to postmodernism:

It was especially the art, writing, film making and criticism of women and minority artists with their recuperation of buried, mutilated traditions, their emphasis on exploring forms of gender - and race-based subjectivity in aesthetic productions and experiences, and their refusal to be limited to the standard canonizations, which added a whole new dimension to the critique of high modernism and to the emergence of alternative forms of culture (Huyssen, 1990: 250).

Mists is a story which rightly attempts to “unmask the constructed nature of reality” (McHale, 1987: 164) and to overthrow patriarchy by attacking the very discourses and legitimizing narratives - in this case, the misogynistic character of Christianity - which sustain it.

The Forgotten Goddess

The long suppression of women’s experience, in religion as in every other aspect of our culture, is inexorably linked to the epistemic character of language.

De Saussure was one of the first to point to the power of language in defining and shaping social and private worlds - an argument later extended and deepened by Derrida and Foucault. In essence, the assertion is that we come to know the world around us through language and other symbol systems; that language has the power to construct reality. And as argued by Dale Spender, the privilege of formulating categories by which to understand the world, of encoding meaning and words, has traditionally and historically been solely reserved for men (Spender, 1980: 143).

In the same way, the discourse of Christianity and the Bible, has consistently suppressed the experience of women by erasing or negating their role within it. The imagery of creation, the story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit, all serve to reinforce the patriarchal order and place women in a position of subordination and even wickedness (Spender, 1980: 166). In the myth of Original Sin, Eve was branded as the evil temptress, instead of Adam being condemned for his weakness in submitting to temptation.

Furthermore, alternative versions of the Creation which included aspects of the Deity as androgynous or female were rejected by innumerable and successive male editors of the Bible. In her research, Elaine Pagels explains how female deities were written out of the Bible: "By the time the process of sorting the various writings ended - probably as late as the year 200- virtually all the

feminine imagery for God had disappeared from orthodox Christian tradition" (Pagels, 1979: 57). According to Pagels, women held positions of leadership and acted as prophets, teachers and evangelists in the earliest years of the Christian movement, but by the third century A.D., any ideas relating to a feminine spirituality were labeled heretical by the orthodox Christians (Pagels, 1979: 59-61). In this sense, women had become the antithesis of religion; religion was equated with male, while anything centering on the female was labeled pagan and cult. Witch burnings in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe attest to this assignment of women as the alien and evil others.

Reclaiming the Goddess

Bradley has reclaimed the history and culture of Goddess worship and has offered women the chance to rediscover their own myths, to validate a culture which has been suppressed and condemned. Thelma Shinn discusses the work of Marion Zimmer Bradley and other authors who "redefine patriarchal myth from female perspective or who reexamine origins to posit how those myths began and what they really mean" (Shinn, 1986: 13). In such projects, Shinn insists that "uncovering the face of the Goddess is essential..." (Shinn, 1986: 13). Bradley is not alone in returning to the historical setting of premedieval Celtic culture.¹³ According to Nickianne Moody, the Celtic setting is a popular

¹³ See Thelma Shinn's *Worlds Within Women: Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women* (1986) for more examples of stories set in the Celtic era.

historical moment for women writers because it provides "a women's fantasy of freedom and equality which has historical support" (Moody, 1991: 199).¹⁴

In *The Mists of Avalon*, Bradley subverts patriarchy by deconstructing Christianity and creating a feminist reading position "by which readers may re-evaluate and reconstruct their own position within the present order and in so doing become part of the subversion and renegotiation of that order" (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 53). First, Bradley dismantles the myths sustaining phallogentric Christian worship. In her telling, Jesus Christ comes to Avalon to be schooled by the Druids and later, Joseph of Arimathea returns and asks permission of the Druids to build a shrine on the isle (Fry, 1993: 73). The very presence of the Christians, then, is attributed to the clemency of the Druids. Even the Holy Grail of legend is revealed as the sacred Cauldron of the Goddess, given to Arthur and the Christians by the Merlin Kevin, who sees it as the only way to ensure its continuing influence in the world of men. When Morgaine reclaims the Cauldron, she becomes the Goddess incarnate and each person sees her as they wish to: Goddess or Virgin Mary: "*I am all things - Virgin and Mother and she who gives life and death. Ignore me at your peril, ye who call on other Names...*" (Bradley, 1982: 771). The incident inspires the Grail quest (Fry, 1993: 73).

¹⁴ Moody suggests that women writers choose the Celtic setting because there is historical evidence of a matrilineal society in which women could own property, give judgment, speak in council and in which women's sexual needs were legitimated and respected (Moody, 1991: 195).

In addition to revealing the myths of Christianity as indebted to matriarchal religion, Bradley reconstructs a genuine culture for women through her representation of Avalon and her rewriting of the legend of Arthur to foreground women's experience. The worship of the Goddess is contrasted to the harsh superficialities and formalities of Christian worship. Sex for the priestesses of Avalon is natural, guiltless and without constraints; it is represented as a part in the cycles of life and death. As a child Morgaine is brought to Avalon and asks if the priestesses ever marry. She is given this answer: "Usually not. They do not vow themselves to any man, except for the Great Marriage, where priest and priestess join in symbol of God and Goddess..." (Bradley, 1982: 135). Gwenhwyfar's perception of sex, on the other hand, is shadowed by the veil of guilt she is forced to wear as a woman in the Christian faith. She is the archetypal medieval Christian woman: uneducated, submissive and fearful. She represents, for the reader, the fate of women under Christianity. Plagued with feelings of guilt and self-hate when she recognizes her adulterous attraction to Lancelot, she blames her barrenness on her own sinful, unfulfilled desires.

Controlled by her father, her priest and her husband, fearful of the open sky, Gwenhwyfar's weakness and fragility are contrasted to the powerful, educated female figures raised in the tradition of Avalon: Morgaine, Viviane

and even Morgause. Morgaine and the others are depicted as learned, literate, self-confident and independent. In this conversation between Gwenhwyfar and Morgaine, for example, the contrast is evident:

"Your voice is lovely, sister. Did you learn to sing so well in Avalon?"

"Why yes, madam, music is sacred - did you not learn the harp in your nunnery?"

Gwenhwyfar shrank. "No, it is unseemly for a woman to raise her voice before the Lord..."

Morgaine chuckled. "You Christians are overfond of that word *unseemly*, especially when it relates to women," she said. (Bradley, 1982: 288)

Even the pious Gwenhwyfar, however, envies Morgaine's freedom and expresses some doubts about her own religion. In her desperation to give Arthur an heir, she turns to Morgaine for a charm to help her conceive a child. For a moment, at least, she recognizes the misogynistic character of Christianity:

I think perhaps God cares nothing for women - all his priests are men, and again and again the Scriptures tell us that women are the temptress and evil - it may be that is why he does not hear me. And for this I would go to the Goddess - God does not care - (Bradley, 1982: 442).

Despite her feelings of oppression, however, Gwenhwyfar sinks deeper into self-loathing, urging Arthur to reject Avalon and serve only the God which oppresses her experience.

Bradley's revival of this women's culture necessarily changes the nature of the original legend of Arthur which is based on tales of chivalry and battle.

Rather than ridiculing these masculine endeavours, however, Bradley makes them seem completely insignificant. In the words of Lee Ann Tobin: "Bradley does to chivalry what male authors have done to the women's side of the Arthur story throughout history: minimalizes and trivializes it" (Tobin, 1993: 149). Instead of a story about battles and heroes, *The Mists of Avalon* paints a picture of life for medieval women: weaving in winter, organizing feasts and dealing with the incessant duties of motherhood. In short, it valorizes the experiences of women.

For me, Bradley's feminist Arthurian legend is a tragedy, but not because of the death of a great war hero and king. Rather because the Celtic worship of the Goddess is ultimately replaced by the masculine institution of Christianity. Avalon fades into the mists, no longer a part of the real world. And even though Bradley suggests that the Goddess lives on in the guise of Christian saints, all the values which she represented died with Avalon. Lefanu would argue that Bradley's reconciliation of oppositions in favour of patriarchy here, undermines any feminist message evident in the rest of *Mists* (Lefanu, 1988: 45). I would suggest, however, that despite the compromise suggested in the end, *Mists* presents a accurate picture of the values of paganism - a religion which endorses inclusiveness. Jeanette Smith asserts that "Goddess worship is depicted as inclusive, accepting of multiple philosophies, including Christianity" (Smith,

1994: 139). Although I do not speak for all of Bradley's work, the complex picture of Goddess worship and the culture of women surrounding it developed in *Mists* is no doubt a feminist undertaking. The rewriting of myth and the deconstruction of patriarchy are poststructuralist tools harnessed here to assist in this feminist project.

Wrestling with the Subject in Ammonite

In her effort to conflate feminist SF and postmodernism, Robin Roberts suggests that one of the ways in which women writers deconstruct patriarchy is by "radically undermining the distinction between magic and science" (Roberts, 1993: 7). Essentially, she claims that witchcraft and herb lore have been negatively depicted in traditional misogynistic SF in opposition to pure 'hard' science and that women SF writers are recovering these tropes for feminist purposes. In doing so, they expose the modernist male science versus female magic dichotomy only to deconstruct it by merging both science and magic to become indistinguishable (Roberts, 1993: 92). Griffith accomplishes an integration of science and nature with skill and believability, but does not turn to traditional 'feminine' alternative sciences or magic to help her in her task.

I would like to address Griffith's treatment of this opposition between the 'masculine' realms of science and technology and the 'feminine' ones of magic and nature. As a book which can be confidently placed within the science fiction

genre, *Ammonite* offers an interesting take on technology and magic because the cultures of Jeep, while not technologically advanced, are not characterised by magic, telepathy and peace as are many women societies in feminist SF. They have developed technology as planet resources permit (there is hardly any metal) and which suits their needs: agriculture, housing or weapons.

However, the inhabitants of Jeep do have certain abilities which appear magical at first, but are later revealed to be related to their special physical link to the planet through the Virus. The *viajeras*, besides witnessing agreements, judging disputes and telling stories, are gifted with a healing ability which confounds even the power of advanced scientific medicine. Thenike, a *viajera*, advises Marghe that the FN-17 vaccine adjuvants are harming her system and heals one of the Mirrors after an attack from the violent Echraidhe tribe. Marghe discovers that this healing power, like the ability to induce conception, is rooted in the planetary Virus and the *viajera's* ability to harness the electromagnetic energy of the planet.

Rather than some mysterious telepathic or magical ability, then, this healing power is rooted in what Roberts would classify as 'hard' science. Marghe develops a theory to explain her partner's abilities. She bases her understanding on the constant vibration of cells in the human body and the electromagnetic energy these vibrations cause:

Modern medicine does it mechanically, like stitching, and chemically - antibiotics and things. But what about electrically? Magnetically? Electrochemically?...Now what if, what if a person has enough control over her magnetic field, her transmissions, to affect another's? What if the healthy person's patterns could interact with the sick person's? (Griffith, 1992: 344)

Instead of deconstructing the opposition of masculine science versus feminine magic by valorizing witchcraft and telepathy and by presenting "alternative science as overcoming and then incorporating the forces of traditional technology" (Roberts, 1993: 93), Griffith demonstrates that women are not necessarily in opposition to science and technology. This position is evident in a recent interview: "Most women love technology: it saves our lives on a daily basis; it makes for speedy travel; it produces tampons, knives that stay eternally sharp, and agricultural machinery that takes the sweat out of growing potatoes and milking cows" (in Kruisweg, 1994). Not only are women and traditional science compatible, the dichotomy of nature/technology is completely shattered in *Ammonite*. Marghe gains her understanding of this healing technique through a harmony with the planet - with nature - and by allowing the Virus to infect her and incorporate itself into her own DNA.

The point is, I think, that binary oppositions such as technology/nature, science/magic and male/female, are no longer valid in a world where socially-constructed gender roles do not exist. Griffith has, in the words of Veronica

Hollinger, "refused to valorize the feminine principal" (Hollinger, 1990: 232).

Hollinger speculates about the possibilities of radical feminist SF:

Given the fact the science fiction as a genre has made quite a habit of equating Women with Nature, and representing Nature as a hostile force...feminist science fiction writers and critics may have to develop an ever more skeptical resistance to the temptation to 'naturalize' anything, even, perhaps especially, femininity.

Instead of legitimizing the feminine experience as does *The Mists of Avalon* by rewriting patriarchal legend and religion from the female perspective, *Ammonite* disregards these categories altogether. There is no feminine or masculine, there are just people trying to survive on a desolate planet. Lefanu would praise *Ammonite* as a "feminist" work which interrogates the ideological construction of gender categories, whereas, she might consider *Mists* to be simply a "feminised" body of work "which runs counter to prevailing ideology by prioritizing women over men, and feminine over masculine" (Lefanu, 1988: 93). I would suggest, however, that the postmodern deconstruction of Christianity in *Mists* reveals the legitimizing function of such a narrative and is thus feminist.

Although *Ammonite* seems to embody some elements of postmodernism in deconstructing the popular beliefs associating women with nature and men with technology, in rejecting the essentialism of its earlier separatist counterparts, as well as incorporating diversity in its vision of an all-female population, I would argue that its allegiance to the modernist framework

overruns its postmodern inclinations. In fact, *Ammonite* illustrates one of the principal concepts of modernism which feminists are reluctant to forego: the notion of an essential self, the centered subject. This subject, however, may differ from the humanist concept as defined by modernism: an essential self, yes, but redefined in feminist terms and negotiated to incorporate the positionality of the postmodern subject.

Feminist theorists have identified the postmodern notion of the Death of the Subject as a significant theoretical obstacle in conflating feminism and postmodernism. Sarah Lefanu writes that "the radical, or transgressive aspects of the structuralist subversion of the subject do not allow for an analysis that shows 'woman' never to have been the subject in the first place" (Lefanu, 1988: 98). In short, just as women were beginning to make their voices heard and to see themselves as subjects, postmodernism declared the fallibility of the humanist subject. But Patricia Waugh suggests that feminism has a need "for strong selves" and to "preserve the belief that human beings *can* act upon the world as partially autonomous agents" (Waugh, 1989: 14). According to Waugh, without a subjective identity, and a sense of agency and history - traits attributed to the humanist subject - the political and emancipatory goals of feminism are undermined.

In the beginning of her quest, Marghe sees herself as an anthropologist: she defines herself by her job. When she finally finds a community of women where she would like to stay, Marghe must face her own shallow self-concept. The woman who is to become her partner, Thenike, begins the questioning process when she asks Marghe: "And these places you go, the people you find, do you come to care for them? Or do you only study them, like strange shells on the beach?" (Griffith, 1992: 177). Marghe faces her past and her present: "It's as though all I am is my job. All I am is an empty shell" (180). The metaphor becomes Marghe's route to self-discovery.

In Ollfoss, all the members of the community must go through a traditional ceremony called the 'deepsearch' where they look within themselves to find their own true identity or calling (Griffith, 1992: 221). When Marghe joins a family in Ollfoss, she too must engage in deepsearch. The experience is described in this way:

She had been inside herself in a way she had never thought possible; listening to her body as a whole; a magnificent, healthy whole...She had sent a question down all the avenues that opened before her: what is my name?...And now she was herself and more. The complete one. (Griffith, 1992: 224)

Marghe discovers her essential identity, evident in her new name, Amun. Her true name is revealed to her in deepsearch where she has an imaginary conversation with her dead mother. Her mother explains that the word

'ammonite', a fossilized shell, comes from the "medieval latin, *cornu Ammonis*, horn of Ammon, due to its resemblance to the involuted horn of Ammon, or Amun, the ram-headed god of Thebes...His name means 'complete one' " (Griffith, 1992: 224). Marghe becomes the shell - she has come to care about the people she studies, she has gone native. She becomes the complete one.

While the deepsearch is primarily a solitary activity, Marghe's relationship with the community of Ollfoss, and especially with the viajera Thenike, also shape her new-found identity and help make her complete. As such, Marghe's search for subjectivity also reflects debates in feminism which at once reject and embrace aspects of the centered and individual humanist subject, as well as the positionality and multiplicity of postmodern subjectivities. Patricia Waugh argues that many writers consider the realist quest narrative the "obvious structure through which to portray the self as an essence which might be 'discovered'," and Griffith has indeed sent Marghe on a quest of self-discovery as well as planetary discovery. However, Marghe discovers her identity, not during her solitary trial in the winter storms, but in her relationship to a partner, to a community and to a planet. In other words, it was not an isolated and individual process.

In the same vein, Patricia Waugh explains how women writers seek to incorporate the humanist concept of the self with the construction of identity in

relationship: "...women writers are less interested in the quest of the isolated individuals than in positing an individual whose maturity will involve the recognition of her construction through the collective" (Vaugh, 1989: 32).

Similarly, Pfaelzer suggests that feminist utopias are organized around Habermas's notion of 'intersubjectivity', which she redefines as a "mode which assumes the possibility of context with others in which desire is constituted for the self. It thus assumes the paradox that in being with the other, I may experience the most profound sense of self" (Pfaelzer, 1994: 100). Hollinger also praises feminist SF as the ideal mode for demonstrating feminism's "allegiance to the principles of humanism, while at the same time questioning that humanism from a position of poststructuralist irony" (Hollinger, 1990: 234).

Ammonite embodies the tension between the modernist subject and the postmodern deconstruction of the subject and thus cannot be situated within either a modern or postmodern framework. However, this ambiguous position is, according to Veronica Hollinger, a very productive one for feminism. In her work, Hollinger calls for a dual project of construction and deconstruction in reading contemporary feminist SF to avoid "the lures of essentialism" (Hollinger, 1990: 237). Indeed, *Ammonite* avoids the essentialist tendencies of previous separatist utopias, while holding onto a centered subject which is constructed through the collective.

In her conclusion, Hollinger states that feminist SF, as a genre, is "neither monolithic, coherent, unified, fixed, nor stable" (Hollinger, 1990: 238). Indeed, the two examples of the genre which I have analyzed confirm this. The subversive strategies adopted in each text differ significantly, including their varying levels of engagement with postmodern or poststructuralist canons; in form, both remain traditional and realist. In Patricia Waugh's assessment, feminist SF "cannot be assimilated to the dominant aesthetic categories of realism, modernism or postmodernism" (Waugh, 1989: 217). Neither can we consider feminist SF a uniform literary tradition any longer. Just as a new postmodern awareness of heterogeneity has forced feminists to rethink their assumptions of universal female oppression and experience, it must inspire us to rethink feminist SF as an equally diverse category.

I have provided here a reading - one among many - of *Ammonite* and *The Mists of Avalon*, which I hope has served to illustrate the subversive potential of feminist SF. As another factor in assessing the role of feminist SF in various feminist political projects, I have outlined the intentions of Marion Zimmer Bradley and Nicola Griffith in creating these texts and their own perceptions of the political implications in their writing. The next chapter hopes to reveal how this intended meaning is renegotiated by the readers and interpreted in the context of their own lives.

Reading Feminist SF

While the intentions of the author, the commercial efforts of the publishers and the recommendations of reviewers and retailers all shape and transform the meaning of a given cultural text, this same text is ultimately interpreted within the lived realities of each individual, group and culture. According to Rowland Lorimer, these realities “...interact with media realities and one another through a constant process of mutual selection, appropriation and redisplay” (Lorimer, 1994: 158). As such, the purpose of this chapter is to investigate what meanings were generated by the readers in my qualitative research about *The Mists of Avalon* and *Ammonite*.

In an effort to retain part of the social context of this meaning-generation, I chose a qualitative research approach for this study: the focus group interview, which allows participants the freedom to express their opinions and detail their experiences. As a complement to these focus groups, I solicited responses to similar open-ended questions about feminist SF on the internet (please see Appendix A for complete details about the research methodology). While the thirty-four responses I received electronically could be considered a small sample, the information gleaned from these questions will serve only to provide a precursory description of the feminist SF readership and will supply some anecdotal interjections and interpretations of the texts other than my own and

those of scholars and critics. Any conclusions drawn about the nature and composition of the feminist SF readership, then, should be extrapolated only with great caution to apply to other readers. The internet was a useful medium for this type of study because its flexibility permitted respondents to answer my questions as verbosely or as succinctly as they wished. In keeping with a qualitative methodology, the open-ended internet questions were designed to solicit interpretations and perceptions, not strictly statistically-analyzable data.

The similarity of this chapter's title to Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) is entirely intentional, and indicative of my own approach to studying the feminist SF readership. While Radway argued that the act of reading romances was an act of resistance despite traditional perceptions of the romance genre as enforcing the values of patriarchy, my own study is examining these same questions on a smaller scale and in terms of a genre which is considered by many to be subversive in content. While I question some of Radway's conclusions about the subversiveness of romance reading, it seems fitting that my own analysis be compared to hers on certain levels. Who reads feminist SF and why? What experiences and contexts do the readers of feminist SF bring to the text? How are gender categories constructed or deconstructed by the reader? Is feminist SF, in fact, subversive? Rather than blindly accepting the assurances of scholars and critics that feminist SF undermines patriarchy

through its texts, I, like Radway, have sought out the assumptions that real readers bring to feminist SF texts and the interpretations that they produce.

Questioning Feminism

Firstly, the ten years that separate Radway's study from mine should be taken into account when considering the diverging cultural and social contexts of the two groups under study. The social perception and historical development of feminism, among other social movements and trends, help define, to a certain extent, the context in which these cultural texts are interpreted. Radway's study was conducted during a period of backlash against the feminist movement: the 1980s. Pamela Sargent calls the 1980s "an ambiguous decade" for women science fiction writers as many "were consciously or unconsciously trying to avoid the label of 'feminist,' a term which had fallen into disrepute" (Sargent, 1995: 4). No doubt in accord with the ignominy of the feminist movement, Radway suggests that the Smithton women seemed to be "struggling simultaneously with the promise and threat of the women's movement" (Radway, 1984: 78). The Smithton readers accused the "women's libbers" of belittling their positions as housewives. Radway also suggest that the women in her study ultimately considered patriarchy the natural form of social organization (Radway, 1984: 10).

While the feminist movement has certainly undergone numerous mutations and developments in the last decade, a skepticism and hostility towards the word 'feminist,' comparable to that expressed by the Smithton readers, was evident among some of the participants in the *Mists* focus group. One woman certainly made clear her reluctance to be associated with the word:

Rita: To me the word 'feminist' immediately brings very negative images of these psychotic women roaring around, putting down men and making themselves almost better than them in an attempt to try to balance and to me that's reverse prejudice and equally bad.

These misgivings about feminism among the feminist SF readers does not arise from a traditional conception of gender roles, as is the case with the Smithton readers, but from a negative stereotype of feminist activists perpetuated by the media. In recruiting interested people for the study, I was often asked, with considerable trepidation, whether men were 'permitted' to attend the focus group and if the discussion would involve any 'man-bashing.' During the discussion of *Mists*, one young woman acknowledged her original misgivings about attending the focus group:

Kerry: I'll admit that I was a little apprehensive that it would be filled with raving lunatics who would be tramping down on men.

Despite these negative perceptions of the word, other participants defined 'feminism' in terms which seemed acceptable to the group. In other words, most of the participants were in agreement with the broad tenets of liberal feminism, -

women's rights to freedom of choice, equality, independence - and even with the acknowledgment of the suppression of women's experience in history and religion, but associated the word 'feminist' with a radical notion of a separatist-lesbian-man-hating woman bellowing her anger to the world. The attitude of these participants certainly echoes the marketing efforts of the 1980s which created 'postfeminism,' a term to "refer to a new generation of women who took for granted the victories secured by their elders, presuming their right to equitable treatment both in the workplace and at home, while shunning the label of feminism" (Goldman et al, 1991: 354).

Thus, unlike the women in Radway's study who perceived patriarchy as natural, most of these women ascribed to the tenets of liberal feminism, if not the term itself. Nonetheless, I was surprised to discover that it was the younger women who were most unwilling to identify themselves with the word 'feminist.' One student between the ages of 19 and 24, said:

Sarah: I agree with what Eleanor was saying before and that's my ideal but I wouldn't want to call that feminist because of the negative connotations that I find the word feminist takes on.

It seems that 'feminism', then, has fallen into disrepute once again and no longer communicates an empowering message for many women, especially younger women. Patricia Caven notes this move away from feminist identification: "I don't think we're going to be able to reclaim 'feminist' from the emotional

subtext it has now, which is basically ball-breaking, dyke, bitch" (Caven, interview).

Nonetheless, many of the internet respondents did not hesitate to align themselves with the feminist movement, despite their awareness of its negative reputation in the eyes of many.¹ When asked whether she considered herself a feminist, one internet respondent said "Yes, and proud of it and not ashamed of the word." Similarly, the participants in the *Ammonite* group, while offering varying definitions of the term, did not shrink from the feminist label and ascribed to some variation of feminism, whether spiritual or social. The male participants and respondents expressed a desire for equality among the sexes, if not a need to restructure social relations to make that equality possible.

While it seemed to be uniquely the *Mists* group which expressed misgivings about the feminist label, this may be partly ascribed to group dynamics; the strong opinions of a few influential voices in the group drowning out those oppositional ones unwilling to defend themselves under attack. While only three of the twenty group members vehemently objected to the use of the term 'feminist,' the group arrived at a consensus to use an alternative descriptive term for the book. In short, those who rejected the feminist label were a minority, but a vocal one. The issue, however, prompts me to wonder if feminist

¹ The participation of many of these internet respondents in feminist electronic discussion forums may partly explain their more willing acceptance of the feminist label. However, there were also many respondents who answered the questions via the rec.arts.sf.written newsgroup.

fantasy readers tend to hold less radical notions of feminism than do readers of feminist science fiction.

Nickianne Moody's conflation of romances and Celtic fantasy novels seems particularly notable in this context. She suggests that historical fantasies have the accessibility and marketability of the romance novels while challenging patriarchal notions of traditional folklore and reclaiming a heritage for women (Moody, 1991: 201). In essence, she implies that the romance market and the historical fantasy market overlap to a certain extent. However, my limited findings indicate otherwise. Only one internet respondent of the twenty who had read *Mists* said that she also read romance novels; and she defined her preference for "feminist romance novels by certain authors whom I have found able to transcend the formula and present strong capable women." Many respondents indicated, rather, a variety of non-fiction books dealing with issues of feminist theory, women's spirituality, history and mythology as their reading preferences outside fantasy fiction. From a market perspective, Ellen Harris at Del Rey says that some romance in science fiction is acceptable, but that the romantic plot should not be considered central to the story. She says: "Futuristic or sf romance is a subgenre of romance books, and has a different goal and a different audience..." (Del Rey, 1994: No. 14)

In the end, it becomes evident that most of the feminist SF readers in this study certainly did identify with some variation of feminism, despite the reluctance of a minority to use the appellation. These readers, then, apply this complex relationship with feminism and its tenets in negotiating the meaning of a feminist SF text. This feminist predilection raises interesting questions in terms of the goals of feminist SF and its effectivity in producing social change. I will address these questions shortly, but I would first like to continue shaping a picture of feminist SF readers in order to better understand the assumptions and experiences which shape the meaning of the cultural text. As will become obvious, not only do they differ from Radway's Smithton women in questioning patriarchy and the role of women within society, but demographically, the feminist SF readers in my study constitute a group very distinct from that of romance readers.

Feminist SF Readers

The most obvious criteria distinguishing the feminist SF readers in my own study from Radway's Smithton readers is the presence of male readers. While the readers in Radway's study were exclusively women, some feminist SF readers in my own research were men.² In terms of age distribution, however, the feminist SF readers in this study did not differ significantly from the romance

² To be more precise, of the fifty people who either participated in the focus groups or responded to the internet questions, nine were men (18 per cent).

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readers; the majority of the feminist SF readers were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four (64 per cent).³ Respondents between nineteen and twenty-four years old made up 22 per cent of the readers, while those over forty-five represented the remaining 14 per cent. In terms of social relationships, however, the feminist SF readers in this study presented a picture completely different from that of the Smithton women.

Radway found that most Smithton readers were married and had children under the age of eighteen. Only five readers in her study reported having no children at all (Radway, 1984: 56-57). In contrast, forty-one people out of the fifty (82 per cent) who participated in either focus groups or answered internet questions about feminist SF reported having no children. Similarly, only half (twenty-five) of the feminist SF readers were married or living with their life partner when they participated in the study. Homosexual relationships are also included in this number, but unfortunately it is difficult to assess the exact proportion of homosexual and heterosexual relationships.⁴

³ I am combining all the different facets of my research here to facilitate the analysis. The fifty people include those who participated in both focus groups (5 in *Ammonite* and 11 in *Mists*) and all those who responded to the internet questions (14 for *Ammonite* and 20 for *Mists*).

⁴ The question about 'marital status' was formulated to include both heterosexual and homosexual variations of marriage or live-in relationships, but only some respondents or participants disclosed their sexual orientation (5 revealed that they were lesbian, three were living with their life partners or married and two were single. Another woman was a divorced bisexual). Although I suspect there might be more homosexuals in the study who chose not to reveal it, I cannot make any assumptions about their number.

The inclusion of non-traditional relationships, however, is significant, especially given the lesbian content in *Ammonite* and the manifest homosexuality of its author. Feminist SF often speculates about separatist worlds where women live without men and a study of its readership could hardly exclude lesbian relationships as an important category. In contrast, Radway's own survey failed to include a 'marital status' category implying a live-in relationship without marriage, or any form of homosexual one (Radway, 1984: 238). Perhaps this oversight reflected her own biased assumptions about sexual orientation and the institution of marriage, or, more likely, she found that those categories were unnecessary given the patriarchal disposition of the romance novel and its readers. What can be said, however, is that the readers of feminist SF differ greatly from romance readers in terms of their domestic relationships and circumstances.

Although seemingly trivial, these two social characteristics served to define, almost on their own, the compensatory and ritual motivations of Radway's Smithton women for reading romances and their interpretation of them. According to Radway, it was to escape the demands of their domestic responsibilities to husbands and children that women engaged in reading romances (Radway, 1984: 92). How do the very different social relationships and domestic realities of feminist SF readers shape their own motivations for reading

this subgenre and their construction of it? Is the act of reading feminist SF ultimately one of escape or compensation? Other factors such as religious beliefs and educational levels may also prove useful in understanding the reasons why these readers choose feminist SF and the context in which they produce interpretations.

In contrast to the high level of Christians among the Smithson women (Radway, 1984: 58), almost half of the feminist SF readers in this study (48 per cent) referred to themselves as either agnostic, atheist, or non-religious. Another ten respondents (20 per cent) indicated that they ascribed to some form of Paganism. Given the content of *Mists of Avalon*, I find this high proportion of Pagans of special interest. Among the other religious denominations noted were Unitarian (10 per cent), a liberal and inclusive Christian-based religion; Jewish (4 per cent); and a variety of other Judeo-Christian based denominations. A few respondents either did not answer the question or answered ambiguously.

In general, the education level of the respondents in my study was well above that of the romance readers in Radway's study. While only 19 per cent of the romance readers had completed a college/university degree or better (Radway, 1984: 58), 74 per cent of the feminist SF readers in my own study indicated that they had a university/college degree or higher.⁵ Of the remaining

⁵ Thirteen of the fifty respondents (26 per cent) indicated that they had acquired a university/college degree, seven (14 per cent) had completed some graduate work, fourteen (28 per cent) had a Master's degree and three (6 per cent) had a PhD.

26 per cent, all indicated having at least some university or college (which, given the sample, implies that they were students and had not yet earned their degree).

I must caution, however, that this high education level may be due in part to the study's target audience and the composition and recruitment process for the focus groups. Thirty-four of the fifty respondents in this study were internet users. Aside from freenets which often provide limited internet access, most internet networks must be accessed through an institution (such as universities), or a computer access company (CompuServe, for example). Both these conditions of access are almost inextricably linked to higher levels of education; in terms of either having student or employee status in an institution with technological access, or having the financial affluence to buy access.⁶

In terms of the focus groups, my recruiting efforts were principally aimed at university students and, while the project did attract some participants from other venues, I must assume that this study included a higher proportion of university students than it otherwise might have. Nonetheless, I cannot resist the temptation to collate the higher educational level of the feminist SF readers in this small study and their motives for reading it. Is it possible that their

⁶ Seventeen of the feminist SF readers indicated that they were full-time students (34 per cent), twenty-seven respondents (54 per cent) were professionals ranging from editors and librarians to computer software designers, three (6 per cent) were in secretarial or sales clerk positions and the remaining three either did not answer the question or were unemployed at the time.

attraction to a genre that questions existing social relations and posits alternative ways of living is related in any way to their level of education?⁷

Feminist SF Pleasures

It became obvious in my research that feminist SF readers are drawn towards the genre for two different, but enmeshed reasons: the first is the attraction toward the speculative nature of SF as a genre, and the second, a preference for the particular writing style and contribution of women SF writers. While some participants certainly claimed escapism as a motivation for reading SF, others stressed the unique capacity of the genre to elucidate certain trends in society, to expose new ways of thinking about their world, to stimulate their intellect as well as their imagination. Following are some excerpts from two focus group participants which illustrate this point:

Gary: Some people think fantasy is all fluff, all made-up things and they don't want to deal with it, they say 'oh, come on, get into the real world,' but there's so much truth in fantasy. When I read really good fantasy authors, they have psychology, not the psychology you learn in school with all the experts and everything, but actual true psychology where I can say I know a person like this or I know a person who acts like that and so on.

Tara: I see science fiction as showing us different ways that we can live. Like, a lot of times fiction simply holds a mirror up so we can just look at ourselves and the way we live. Science fiction - what it offers is the possibility of living differently....

⁷ My speculation here is also partly influenced by Ann Gray's findings that the major differentiating factor in women who liked soap-operas and those who disliked them was their level of education (Gray, 1993).

Tara's description of science fiction as a genre which forwards alternate living possibilities echoes the arguments of numerous SF scholars which commend the cognitive and didactic nature of the genre. By taking the reader beyond the models of the known world, challenging existing social relations and structures and making them alien, SF compels the reader to question her or his own assumptions. This potential in SF for what Darko Suvin calls 'cognitive estrangement,' entices many SF readers, but, as will become evident, is particularly meaningful for feminist SF readers.

Originally attracted by the intellectual potential of a genre dominated by male writers, many avid feminist SF readers initially entered the worlds of SF through the intermediary of male authors. Some women feminist SF readers in this study now specifically seek out women authors when choosing a book or read women authors in higher proportion than they do male authors.⁸ Their reasons for doing so are related mainly to the dubious treatment of female characters in traditional, masculine SF and the differing styles they perceive men and women writers to have. Patricia Caven notes that many of her female customers refuse to buy books by male authors. She says: "I have more women who will say: 'I'm not interested in reading male authors' because they've been

⁸ Sixteen out of fifty participants said that they specifically looked for women authors when choosing a book. However, almost half of the respondents indicated that more than fifty per cent of the books they read are written by women (I caution that books written by women are not necessarily feminist as I have defined the term).

disappointed. They get tired of the stereotypes and the limited categories that women can have" (Caven, interview). Accordingly, one woman justifies her choice to read women writers almost exclusively:

Tara: I started off reading men - Isaac Asimov. I read every single thing he ever wrote and then I discovered women wrote science fiction and I don't think I read another male science fiction writer after that...[male science fiction] is hierarchical, confrontational. There's always got to be a good war in there.

Similarly, one female internet respondent wrote: "I've found it increasingly difficult to read male SF writers, with few exceptions, as the chauvinist elements I once could ignore, tend to grate on my nerves."

According to Patricia Caven, women readers generally tend to prefer an emphasis on characterization over plot; a trait, says Caven, found more in books written by women than by men (Caven interview). Julie explains her own partiality toward women SF writers:

Julie: Women write a very different type of science fiction which I love. They write it a lot better, I think, to my tastes...it's all technoschlock with the men in science fiction, usually, unless it's a particularly good author. 'I've got the ship, I've got the war - I'm going to go get the planet or we're going to solve the crisis.' It's very technical.

One male participant also commented on the near absence of violence in *Mists* as refreshingly distinct from the proliferation of violent scenes in male fantasy novels. Moreover, some internet respondents suggested that a principal characteristic distinguishing feminist SF from mainstream SF was a concern with

social relations rather than technology. For example, one respondent said:

"Feminist SF tends to be more about people's lives if cultural and societal structures were different." Another added: "Feminist SF focuses on the dynamics between people within society." While it may be true that women indeed write differently than men, does the emphasis on characterization in feminist SF, its concern with social structures and relationships rather than action, make it another 'feminine genre,' akin to the romance novel and the soap-opera?

Feminine Genres and Feminist SF

In her critical survey of feminist cultural studies, Yvonne Tasker discusses the proliferation of research aimed at reclaiming popular cultural forms for women and discovering their specific appeal to women readers/viewers. Tasker defines these 'gendered genres' as:

...primarily directed at women readers, addressing and/or constructing a feminine subject (position) through targeting, features in women's magazines and a textual stress on the world within which women are assumed to be constituted. (Tasker, 1991: 88).

In short, these genres focus on the realms which are traditionally associated with the cultural construction of femininity: the domestic sphere, the family and relationships. They inscribe what Annette Kuhn calls female desire and address the feminine spectator/reader. John Fiske's work on female and male viewing

audiences is especially relevant here. He characterizes male desires as 'goal-centered' and satisfied by a 'closed' narrative structure such as the crime series (or the quest) and female ones as 'process-centered' and better addressed by an open text such as the soap-opera (Fiske, 1987).

I have demonstrated earlier that *The Mists of Avalon* indeed validates traditionally feminine domains by rewriting the Arthurian tale to emphasize the lives and experiences of women characters, by reclaiming the lost Goddess and a buried and forgotten women's culture. In other words, the text does stress women's historical and emotional experiences rather than men's. Nonetheless, its textual structure and message differ significantly from those of the romance novel as described by Radway and those of other popular 'feminine genres' such as the soap-opera. According to Radway, the romance "...permits the reader to identify with the heroine at the moment of her greatest success, when she secures the attention and recognition of her culture's most powerful and essential representative, a man" (Radway, 1984: 84).

The heroine in *Mists*, however, does not acquire power through her relationship to a man, but through her status as a priestess of Avalon. The accessibility and authenticity of the priestesses' magical power was mentioned in the focus group as an empowering image:

Kerry: ...It really gave you a sense that it's something they really worked at, the personal strength, that they had to work at it, it wasn't just sort of I wave my hand and poof!

Other comments corroborate this perception of the book as one which portrayed women as powerful without reference to men:

Eleanor: Women certainly had more respect back then, than I think they do today even.

Internet respondent: It wanted to give a different picture of history where women have had important roles and power.

Mists constructs a culture in which women are powerful in their own right, where sexuality is not fettered by the bonds of marriage. Moreover, it paints patriarchal religion as force which ultimately suppresses women's experience. As expressed by one internet respondent: "Christianity has always been represented as the civilizing, moral force; to see it as a force for imposing male domination and to overthrow female-centered relations is radical."

Ammonite is even more radical in its disaffection from the 'feminine genre.' It creates an alternate world where *there are no men*. It refuses the feminine construct by creating an environment in which women are no longer constrained by the gender categories of our culture which often dictate a woman-nature affiliation and assume nurturing behaviour as inherently feminine. The women in *Ammonite* are portrayed as simply human - some violent, some nurturing. As such, *Ammonite* cannot legitimately be compared to a romance text; it cannot be considered a 'gendered' or 'feminine' text in the traditional sense because it denies the existence of gender constructs .

While it is clear that both *Mists* and *Ammonite* were indeed written for women - that is with the woman reader as the assumed audience - and address issues of special concern to women, it is evident that they do not "construct a *feminine* subject position" (my emphasis, Tasker, 1991: 88) in the sense outlined in 'gendered genre' studies. Anne Cranny-Francis proposes, rather, that texts such as feminist SF construct a *feminist* reading position, the position assumed by the reader from which the text seems to be coherent, and a *feminist* subject position, the subject position constructed by feminist discourse outside the text (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 25). In essence, Cranny-Francis argues that any reader who engages with this text in a subject position other than a feminist one, will find the conflict with dominant ideological discourses unnerving and uncomfortable. As a concrete example of Cranny-Francis's feminist subject position theory, this excerpt from the *Ammonite* focus group illustrates how different readers interpret the struggle over the meaning of gender categories in a book set in an alternate reality with no men:

Alex: The interesting thing that stood out to me was that they were all women but it didn't seem like a problem. It was very natural almost...

Susan: ...I think that what she did was she did create men through her female characters. I found that there were very male characters. I think that they had what we would consider traditionally male roles. You had a fisherman, a sailor, right?...So I don't think even though there weren't any men, men were present; men were there in the book.

Alex: ...We're talking about male roles and socialized female roles. Maybe part of the idea is to say, you know, 'hold on - maybe this is

just what we've been geared to think'...maybe she's breaking down like, you know, we've got these women and some women are more this way or more that way, and maybe we're just closer, we're not as separate.

In this conversation, Susan refuses to extricate herself from the dominant discourse of femininity and masculinity, interpreting the female characters as having 'masculine' characteristics and thus representing men in the story. Alex, on the other hand, struggles to reconceptualize gender categories when engaging with the text. Cranny-Francis would say that he has adopted a feminist reading position and that Susan has failed to do so. However, their respective subject positions, that is their relationship to discourses outside the text, seem to introduce some contradictions. Susan identifies with feminist discourse, while Alex does not to the same degree. What does this mean for the theory that feminist fiction constructs feminist subject positions?

The hidden assumption in Cranny-Francis's argument that the regular readers of feminist fiction necessarily approach the text as feminists certainly needs to be addressed and opens questions as to the effectivity of these cultural texts in renegotiating meaning. If the only comfortable subject position from which to read feminist SF is a feminist one, those who enjoy the genre and *choose* to read it will almost exclusively be feminists. As demonstrated previously, the readers in this study, for the most part, ascribed to some form of feminism. Do these readers, then experience feminist SF as a subversive genre? Does feminist

SF challenge their assumptions about patriarchy and gender categories? Does it contribute to feminist efforts for social change?

Feminist SF and Political Intervention

At this point, I feel it crucial to question feminist SF's role in the broader context of feminist political efforts. In this study, I have examined the authors of *Mists* and *Ammonite* to interrogate their political motivations. I have also investigated the production of these texts as mass market commodities and the implications of their status as popular culture products on their subversive potential. While feminist SF scholars seem to agree that the genre undermines patriarchy and contributes to material feminist projects in various ways, my own research attempts to corroborate this theory by addressing the readers themselves.

Feminist SF scholars suggest various ways in which this unique fiction undermines patriarchy and furthers feminist political aims. Unwilling to embrace these assertions blindly, I asked feminist SF readers if they thought this genre was an effective means of advancing various feminist projects. Indeed, the majority of the respondents suggested that feminist SF did forward feminist aims, and their answers corresponded remarkably with the principal arguments of feminist SF critics and scholars.

Spreading the Word and Converting Unbelievers

The first of these positions contends that as popular fiction, feminist SF extends the reach of feminist theory to a wider audience than would otherwise be exposed to it. Marleen Barr presents this argument as part of her larger project to break down the barriers between academic feminist theory and popular texts. She claims that feminist SF is a powerful educational tool which "makes theory available to women, shows them how they stand to benefit from the heightened awareness feminist theory can impart to the texts they might already know" (Barr, 1987: xx). As a more specific example of this position, Suzette Haden Elgin, author of *Native Tongue* (1984) and linguist, explains her own motivations for writing feminist SF rather than academic theory:

I think I have managed to get before the widest audience that is available to me the hypotheses in question...I wanted to do that. I have fit all of that 'stuff' into a story line because otherwise people wouldn't read it. I saw absolutely no purpose in getting this material before a handful of scholars. (Elgin, 1987: 181).

Nickianne Moody uses the same reasoning in the context of feminist fantasy. She suggests that feminist fantasy "seeds tenets of feminist consciousness in a fictional form which has the accessibility of romance" (Moody, 1991: 201).

Similar opinions were expressed among the readers in my study. One internet respondent maintained that feminist SF "makes public that other women also have similar dreams." This position is greatly strengthened by

'cross-over' books such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which are more widely read than books labeled as science fiction or fantasy. In this sense, the success of *Mists* in the mainstream fiction market was mentioned by one focus group participant as contributing to broader political aims. In the context of Paganism and Wiccan religions especially, another woman said about *Mists*:

Eleanor: I think this book has got it out to a lot more people, particularly younger people because it is a novel, it's meant for entertainment and people who wouldn't normally pick up a serious piece of non-fiction about Paganism or Wicca would read this book for the fantasy element.

Implied in the claim that feminist SF assists feminist projects as the popular culture equivalent of feminist theory and by exposing a wider audience to feminist ideas, is the more dubious conviction that feminist SF has the power to foster support for feminism in readers previously unsympathetic to the cause or ignorant of it. In other words, feminist SF is seen as having the power to convert readers. This idea is well demonstrated by this comment: "Feminist SF gets mainstream people used to the idea in a relatively non-threatening way."

As demonstrated in this study, however, feminist SF readers usually already ascribe to some variation of feminism. This fact was raised among those respondents more incredulous of feminist SF as a major politicizing force. One internet respondent said: "Explicitly feminist SF will probably only be read by feminists..., and so is preaching to the converted. Non-feminists will not be

converted by such stuff." Another internet respondent agreed that feminist Sf "probably has a negligibly small audience to help change positions in the entire habitus." Yet another internet respondent suggested less radical feminist ideas as more marketable and perhaps more effective in promoting social change:

I think making really good SF that just happens to portray women as well-rounded characters who give an equal contribution to society is a better tactic than specifically 'feminist' fiction, because the sort of people who would benefit most from the message will not pick up 'feminist' books.

This respondent raises a point often ignored in many critical works analyzing feminist SF. The process of negotiating new meanings involves more than an interaction with the text, but a more complex decision-making process; one involving the discriminating choice of readers to select one text among many. In chapter three, I examined the role of publishers and retailers in this process. Even once the reader acquires the text, however, she or he must finally make the decision to *read* it among all the other texts or possible activities available. This excerpt from the *Mists* focus group illustrates this crucial step:

Eleanor: I had this [*Mists*] given to me and I had it maybe six months before I read it...In fact I read the first two pages when it was first given to me and I thought 'boring!' and about six months afterwards, I picked it up and read it cover to cover.

Declaring feminist SF a subversive genre, then, necessarily involves more than a textual analysis. Eleanor's account of her experience with *Mists* certainly serves to justify the encompassing approach I have taken in this project.

While many internet respondents suggested that feminist SF did succeed in furthering feminist political goals, when asked if *Mists* or *Ammonite* had changed their own perspective, only seven out of twenty internet respondents for *Mists* and only two of the fourteen *Ammonite* internet respondents said that the book had affected them personally.⁹ However, even the minority who provided affirmative answers to this question did not suggest that the book had transformed them from conservative to feminist values, but rather that it had reinforced their already changing beliefs. For example, one internet respondent wrote this about *Mists*:

It helped strengthen and encourage my views that there was something really wrong with a life view that always put women in secondary roles. My feminist attitudes and my resistance to patriarchy were increasing anyhow before I read the book, and it was like food for my soul.

Similarly, another respondent said: "To a certain extent, yes. My views were already changing, which is one reason I sought out the book, but it helped clarify and solidify my thinking." Thus, it becomes obvious from this discussion that feminist SF can be considered subversive without actually converting readers to feminism. I hope to demonstrate that its role within the broader feminist political project is more complex than a matter of converting readers to feminism.

⁹ I am isolating the internet respondents in this case because the focus groups yielded more complex answers to this question which I feel should be addressed in a separate section.

Prophets or Theorists

Another common argument explored by both feminist SF scholars and the readers in this study bestows prophetic power on the genre, more specifically in reference to feminist utopias. In essence, this position suggests that feminist SF provides a forum in which to explore possible futures for women. In the words of Robin Roberts, feminist SF "provides blueprints for the future" (Roberts, 1994: 69). This predictive power has also long been assigned to mainstream science fiction without any stunning results to prove its validity. In the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Ursula Le Guin dismisses this position and insists that science fiction has more to do with the present than with the future: "Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive...Our society puts mistaken trust in its artists... using them as prophets and futurologists" (Le Guin, 1979: 156-157). In his analysis of science fiction and utopias, Tom Moylan commends the 'critical' utopias of the 1970s (mainly feminist) for their "awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream" (Moylan, 1986: 10).

While this predictive conception of SF was evident to a small extent in this study, many respondents stressed the imaginative character of these future visions: not so much blueprints as alternative fantasies to patriarchy. In this

response, feminist SF's predictive power is coupled with a more speculative conception of science fiction:

Feminist writers utilize the tropes of SF to unique advantage: to imagine worlds that we might work toward, against, or simply try on for size. SF allows the world crafting part of that synthesis. Feminism catalyzes the particular goal of changing our world.

This process of imagining alternatives to present, unsatisfactory situations, while not always a guideline for realistic actions or futures (most specifically in reference to feminist separatist utopias), remains a crucial impetus in promoting social change. This point is made by Tom Moylan: "If those whose lives are oppressed and unfree are able to dream beyond the present, then the utopian impulse...will play an increasingly significant role in the oppositional project" (Moylan, 1986: 212). Indeed, the imaginary worlds in feminist SF further the objectives of feminism by inciting the various feminist movements to evaluate themselves and their objectives, by providing a forum in which to explore ideas and theoretical experiments. In fact, Ursula Le Guin calls science fiction stories "experiments in imagination" (Le Guin, 1979).

Thus feminist SF, in constant interplay with the broader discourse of various feminisms, has become self-reflexive. This engagement with feminist discourses is evident in the evolution of feminist separatist utopias, from the homogeneous vision in Gilman's *Herland* (1915) to Griffith's diverse cultures of women in *Ammonite* (1992). In the same vein, one internet respondent remarked

that "feminist SF is valuable not only to visualize possibilities, but also to document our progress in this area." My analysis will now turn to an in depth examination of the focus groups and their perceptions of the role of *Ammonite* and *Mists* within the broader context of feminism and the women's movement.

Ammonite: Engaging Feminist Discourse

While the three avid feminist SF readers in the focus group confirmed that *Ammonite* resembled many other works of feminist SF and could be well placed within that literary tradition, they also suggested that it deviated from other works of feminist SF in two important ways. The first was Griffith's talent as a writer. Although she was familiar with the genre, Julie had a preconception of lesbian fiction and feminist SF as being of lower literary quality. She admitted, however, that *Ammonite* dashed her stereotypes of the genre:

Julie: I really liked this book. It was interesting and sort of fast-paced. I've read quite a few books that address this premise where there are no women or the men are just sort of kept in a little area and only allowed out for breeding and I thought she did a better job than usual; much less stereotypical.

Julie stresses the importance of the story, here. *Ammonite*, for her, surpassed other feminist SF or Lambda award winners that she had read because the story was fast-paced and interesting. Indeed, the fact that Griffith is a talented storyteller may well attract a wider audience. Nonetheless, Julie states that *Ammonite* ultimately did not present her with an intellectual challenge:

Julie: I think if you never read feminist stuff at all and don't know anything about the feminist movement, you might find it [*Ammonite*] kind of challenging, maybe. As a feminist work, it was better written than most but I don't really find it particularly enlightening...it's the same type of thing that you read in other feminist SF.

Similarly, Carol relates the book to other familiar works of feminist SF:

Carol: I didn't find it particularly challenged anything that I had previously thought. Like most themes in there had been things I had read in various bits in different books and even the biofeedback, I've seen that elsewhere too...

One internet respondent suggested, however, that the message in *Ammonite*, the construction of a positive all-women world, is a one that "needs to be repeated as often as possible." Although *Ammonite* can be situated within the familiar tradition of feminist SF and rehashes, to a certain extent, many of the ideas in these stories, some internet respondents also agreed with my own reading of *Ammonite* as contesting some of the dominant assumptions of feminism. One woman wrote:

It engages in discussion with feminists as well as arguing against the rhetoric that holds that women are (all) gentler and kinder than men, that war is a product of a male culture, and in a female culture cruelty would be unknown. Nonsense, she says.

Another respondent said that *Ammonite* "undermined the generalizations about feminism." In this sense, *Ammonite* contributed to an ever-changing and evolving discourse which explores and evaluates various facets of feminism.

The *Ammonite* focus group decided through consensus that most readers of feminist SF are indeed feminists, or, as expressed by Julie, "on their way to being one." Julie's comment, I think, pinpoints one of the principal ways in which feminist SF and other feminist literature promote revolutionary change. People are not static. Their opinions and their views about society are always in flux, through growing and learning and through experience. This is especially true for those who seek out didactic texts, who are always willing to explore the unknown.

We are not born feminists. The process of ascribing to the values and beliefs of diverse feminist movements is a gradual one, one which is inspired and greatly facilitated by the availability of feminist texts and stories. The speculative nature of feminist SF is especially significant to this process of development because it offers something beyond realistic fiction. Rather than focusing on the various oppressive experiences of women in our society, feminist SF often imagines positive alternatives - it offers feminists a forum for dreaming. Like any culture, the feminist one needs stories too. Each text that approaches feminist dreams, albeit in different ways, contributes something to feminism, and perhaps strikes a chord in one person and not in another. In this excerpt from the *Ammonite* focus group, Julie talks about her introduction to feminism and the role of feminist fiction in the development of her ideas:

Julie: I think the fiction that I read kind of helped me develop as a feminist when I was younger. I can't say specifically what. I remember reading "The Woman's Room," it's not science fiction, but I remember reading it in grade 11 or grade 12 and I considered myself a feminist before then, but it was *the book* -

Susan: -it solidified it. You ranted around for a couple of weeks after reading the book...

Julie: Well, it was very 'baby boomerish,' you know, the way it dealt with stuff. Here was a book that was at least dealing with it even if it was for the generation ahead of me and I think that provided more focus to what I thought. Who knows what book people come across that does that?

And although *Ammonite* may not have been 'the book' for the participants in this study, its positive and natural representation of lesbianism was mentioned by many as a striking feature of the book and perhaps one that could serve to dismantle prejudices against homosexuality. For some, -men in particular - promoting lesbian acceptance was perceived as one of the principal messages of the book. One male respondent said that *Ammonite* "promoted lesbianism as natural" and in the focus group, the only male participant suggested much the same thing:

Alex: Wasn't part of the point that lesbianism was natural and that it wasn't a problem and maybe to introduce us to feeling that this kind of behaviour is and should be socially okay.

Although the lesbian content was viewed by the focus group members as a small portion of the novel, it seemed to be considered a crucial criterion for the classification of the book as oppositional:

Tara: Because it wasn't really overtly lesbian...

Julie: Somebody that's homophobic, that's what they would latch onto even though I don't think it was a big part of the story.

In his study of homosexuality in science fiction and fantasy, James Riemer certainly argues that the positive representations of gays and lesbians in mass market SF can promote tolerance in society:

Outside their sexual preference, the men and women in these tales are much like the heterosexual men and women found in science fiction and fantasy. This alone may have the most positive effect on the reader's increasing ability to accept through these works the reality of homosexuality over the myths. (Riemer, 1986: 160).

Riemer assumes that the readers of these books are principally heterosexual, an assumption disproved by the study of the readers undertaken here. There is a need to address lesbian readers and their own relationship to these texts.

Although it is beyond the scope of this analysis to do so, Jean Kennard provides an interesting theory of lesbian readers: polar reading, in which "the reader redefines herself in opposition to the text; if that self-definition includes lesbianism, this becomes apparent in any commentary she may make on her reading" (Kennard, 1986: 77). Kennard's concept of definition by opposition, however, implies that the text encodes heterosexuality. What of texts that encode a lesbian position?

In addition to the feminist and sexual themes in *Ammonite*, the focus group members identified many other underlying themes which they considered important. Some of the themes mentioned by the group included anti-

corporatism, pro-evolution, low technology, natural healing and humanism.

Feminist SF, then, must be considered within the broader context of other social trends and problems. While I consider its principal role to be within the feminist framework, the issues addressed in these works usually incorporate many other issues of interest to both women and men. The wide appeal of *The Mists of Avalon* and the various trends it addressed, for example, certainly became apparent in the focus group conducted in this study.

The Mists of Avalon: Every Woman's Bible

While the *Ammonite* readers in this study seemed to perceive Griffith's book as another voice adding to the sometimes dissonant discourse of feminist SF, many of the participants in the *Mists* group confessed that Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel had a profound impact in their lives. All those participants who disclosed this sort of powerful experience in relation to *Mists* were women. The two male participants in the focus group were attracted to the book and the project not because of the feminist perspective, but because of their particular interest in Celtic history and culture. The remaining participants cited various reasons for their expressed interest in a project relating to feminist fantasy and *Mists* in particular. Some were avid SF readers, others were fans of Marion Zimmer Bradley's works, and still others were attracted by the Arthurian legend and the woman-empowering religious elements in the book. For most of these

women, however, *Mists* was a book which enthralled them, captivated their imagination and sometimes touched their lives in significant ways. According to Dale Spender, "...it is not unusual to find women acknowledging that a book 'changed my life'" (Spender, 1989: 47) and there were certainly some such acknowledgments in the *Mists* focus group.

For these women, *Mists* seemed to be a spiritual and emotional experience, more than an intellectual one. One woman said that the book helped her through a painful divorce:

Ashley: Put is this way, I didn't need a psychiatrist going through my divorce. For some reason it [*Mists*] helps you to hold your head high and know your self-worth...

Similarly, another respondent disclosed that *Mists* also helped her cope with a traumatizing period in her life:

Eleanor: I would say that this book has been instrumental in helping me get over sexual abuse as a child that I didn't have any recollection of until about five or six years ago. It was a time of crisis and this book helped me to deal with it. It has been instrumental in developing my spirituality and I feel that I've gone through one of these life transformations, and this has been something which has given me a lot of courage and impetus and insight to deal with it.

Several internet respondents also named *Mists* as an instigator of their research into alternative forms of spirituality such as Wicca.¹⁰ One woman said that the

¹⁰ Three members of the *Mists* focus group were Wiccan, while five of the twenty internet respondents for *Mists* indicated a Pagan/New Age religious affiliation. Wicca is generally considered to be one among many forms of Paganism.

book "increased my interest in the goddess religions and nudged me to learn more." And another internet respondent wrote: "This book had a profound impact on my life with respect to how I have since viewed spirituality/religion, and the nature of (male-dominated) Christianity in our modern culture." While these limited examples do not attest to similar experiences in all its readers, there is much to suggest that many women experienced *Mists* as an empowering text, as opening a spiritual or intellectual door to feminist thought, religion and history.

It is often suggested that *Mists*, through its popularity and ubiquity, acted as an agent in the rise of the Neo-Pagan movement. Some internet respondents claimed that *Mists* challenged mainstream values in society mostly in terms of its portrayal of religion. Among these comments, one woman wrote that *Mists* was "instrumental in furthering the 'return to the Goddess'" and another said the book challenged "the Judeo-Christian values prevalent in today's America." *Mists* has certainly taken on a significant role Pagan circles. One Wiccan focus group participant said that almost every Pagan group she knows lists *Mists* as a crucial reference text. Another witch in the group attested to the authentic portrayal of Wiccan religious practices in *Mists*. She also suggested that "a lot of Wiccan, witches, say this is our bible." The bible status of the book was raised on

other occasions during the focus group; not so much in terms of its relationship to Wicca, but in more ambiguous terms. For example, one participant said:

Ashley: I think this book is like a bible that almost every woman should have at home and read...

This allusion to a 'woman's bible' was raised again when I discovered that many participants and internet respondents had read the book multiple times.¹¹ They called the book a nexus which appealed to many different interests and incorporated multiple levels of understanding within it. As such, they reread it at different points in their life, exploring and experiencing distinct aspects each time.

Rita: This is one of the few fantasy books that has changed as I grow, I see more depth in the book...The author wrote the book from a very crone aspect, because there's just so many levels in it as you get older. It just seems to be a different story every time you read it.

Ashley: That's why it's like a bible because there's always something new in it that you find because you've grown so much, you've understood another level of depth in the book.

In these excerpts and throughout the discussion, it seemed as though *Mists* took on a mystical power of its own. It was referred to as a teacher, a counselor and a bible. For these women, *Mists* was more than a rewriting of the Arthurian tale, it was intrinsically tied to an esoteric concept of 'womanhood.' Through its

¹¹ Twelve of the twenty internet respondents for *Mists* had read the book more than once, some up to five times. While a number of the focus participants had also read the book more than once, it was difficult to assess the exact number during the discussion.

positive representation of women and sexuality, of the Goddess religion and the women's culture of Avalon, *Mists* touched these readers in significant ways.

Aside from its pagan and spiritual appeal, *Mists* attracted readers who were simply lovers of the Arthurian tale, fantasy aficionados, or history enthusiasts. *Mists* recreated a historical situation in which women held real power - a very attractive scenario for many women. In this sense, many readers approached the book from a historical perspective, rather than a spiritual one. One male reader, especially, suggested that the rewriting of the Arthurian legend and the alternative vision of history in the book inspired him to question his assumptions about women in history:

Matthew: From a sociological and a historical point of view, it made me question, maybe women did play a bigger role back then...I've always been told the women's movement started in the late Victorian era but maybe it started quite a long time ago.

Another focus group participant revealed that the book's alternative version of the legend of St. Patrick driving the snakes from Ireland forced her to re-examine the legends and myths she has always believed in:

Sarah: And here, well, you see the snakes were people. And the people were represented by what they wore which was the symbol of the serpent. That really made me ask myself what other things am I really closed minded about, am I only seeing as how they're presented to me and not questioning and investigating other things that I've taken for granted.

In contrast to the life-altering testimonies discussed above, the discoveries inspired by the book in these excerpts seem very minor. However, this initial questioning of assumptions, this exposure of present social structures as constructed, ultimately leads to real change in thought and action. In the words of one internet respondent: "The more people who read about a more balanced society, the more will work in subtle ways to bring it about."

For many women, then, *Mists* not only undermined the patriarchal force of Christianity, it also provided a foundation for their own inner strength, a door into new realms of spirituality. *Mists* was a revolutionary force in some lives. In others, it was simply another instance of 'herstory.' From my analysis of Marion Zimmer Bradley's intentions in chapter three, it is unlikely that the book was meant as a spiritual inspiration and a 'woman's bible.' However, there is much to suggest that it has become much more than a fantasy tale for many women; they have generated meaning which is especially significant in the context of their experience, whether a difficult period in their life or a shift in spiritual growth. This book has given some women the insight and the knowledge to change their lives, and in so doing, the lives of others. I think *Mists's* subversive power has been well proven within the experience of the readers in this study. I must caution, however, that the status and the recognition of this book, both within the SF circle and without, is far beyond that of any other feminist fantasy

novel and that its level of subversiveness can not necessarily be attributed to many other feminist SF novels. A more comprehensive examination of feminist SF is required before confirming the subversive potential of the genre.

Feminist SF and Community

In her study, Radway proposes that romance readers have formed an illusory community, one inspired by "a collectively elaborated female fantasy." (Radway, 1984: 97). However, she points out that none of Dot's customers knew each other before becoming involved in her study and that they rarely discussed the books they read with others. The female community of romance readers, Radway argues, is "a huge, ill-defined network composed of readers on the one hand and authors on the other..." and is "mediated by the distances of modern mass publishing" (Radway, 1984: 97). While much the same could be said for the feminist SF community, the long tradition of fandom and community in science fiction has survived and evolved with the emergence of new subgenres. The existence of science fiction conventions, - more commonly known as 'cons' - various fandom organizations, and even 'fanzines' demonstrates the vastness of this science fiction community and the degree to which its members are involved. The rising popularity of feminist SF has also seen the development of its own community, complete with awards, conventions and publications. Wiscon, for example, is an annual SF convention devoted

specifically to feminist SF and is held yearly in Wisconsin attracting a panoply of writers, scholars and fans.

In this study, 74 per cent of the respondents had friends who also read feminist SF and with whom they discussed feminist SF books regularly. While only seventeen of the fifty respondents (34 per cent) had attended a SF convention¹² at least once and only nineteen (38 per cent) read SF related magazines,¹³ many of the participants were active on internet discussion groups such as Fem-Biblio, Bookwoman or Fem-SF,¹⁴ or on the rec.arts.sf.written newsgroup. Some newsgroups are also devoted to the discussion of a select author's accumulated works and provide an electronic forum in which fans can exchange ideas about the novels and information about the authors. And according to Patricia Caven, SF readers particularly enjoy learning about their favourite authors. In response to this enthusiasm, Caven points to the presence of many science fiction authors on the internet: "More and more authors are getting onto the net, have blurbs about themselves, talk about their lives because people have that curiosity" (Caven, interview).¹⁵ Del Rey was the first SF

¹² Some respondents were involved in the organization of Wiscon.

¹³ Some of the magazines listed by respondents included *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Analog*, *F&SF*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Locus*, *SF Chronicle* and various fanzines.

¹⁴ FEM-SF is a private listserver devoted to the discussion of feminist SF. Its fifty-five non-concealed subscribers include feminist SF writers, scholars and fans.

¹⁵ For instance, Nicola Griffith has "The Official Nicola Griffith Page" with interviews and personal information, comments about her works and upcoming appearances.

publisher to take advantage of this new community when it designed and distributed its *Del Rey Internet Newsletter*. According to John Mutter, the science fiction community is the “ninth-largest group on the Internet, it consists of more than 80,000 readers worldwide who post several hundred messages a day at minimum” (Mutter, 1994: 18). The advent of the internet has helped foster many specialized communities and feminist SF readers have certainly taken advantage of this electronic forum to consolidate and build their own.

In her conclusion, Radway ultimately concedes that the romance reader’s “...domestic role in patriarchal culture is left virtually intact by her leisure-time withdrawal” (Radway, 1984: 212). Although she argues that the act of reading romances is one of resistance, Radway concludes that romances do not motivate these women to address the circumstances which compel them to read romances in the first place. Moreover, Radway’s claims about a female romance reading community are undermined in this passage:

Because the oppositional act is carried out through the auspices of a book and thus involves the fundamentally private, isolating experience of reading, *these women never get together to share either the experience of imaginative opposition, or, perhaps more important, the discontent that gave rise to their need for the romance in the first place.* (emphasis added, Radway, 1984: 212).

It should be pointed out, however, that I have not conducted an internet search for any forms of electronic female romance communities; it is very possible that some electronic forums for discussion of this fiction have arisen since Radway’s

work. Nonetheless, women science fiction fans formed communities dedicated to action long before the internet age. The internet has only served to eliminate constraints of time and space for these communities.

For example, Henry Jenkins's research on 'slash zines' illustrates the degree to which women actively participated (and still do) in appropriating and rewriting male-centered *Star Trek* narratives "to provide a closer fit to these women's desires" (Jenkins, 1992: 115). Marion Zimmer Bradley also notes that the community of women science fiction fans formed through the circulation of fanzines and participation at *Star Trek* and other conventions, was crucial in developing the careers of female science fiction writers in a male-dominated field (Bradley, 1985b: 76). Thus, where the symbolic female romance community fails to encourage women to social action, there is much to suggest that the active feminist SF community nurtures the careers of women SF writers and provides a real forum in which fans, writers and scholars can discuss the genre and the different possibilities imagined therein to restructure the patriarchal order.

In addressing the readers themselves, this chapter has sought to understand the various interpretations that feminist SF readers produce in relation to the text and, ultimately, to assess in real terms the subversive potential of the genre. I must stress that undermining patriarchy does not necessarily involve the conversion of readers to the values espoused by the

feminist movement. In this sense, the results of the focus groups and internet questions about *Ammonite* sufficiently demonstrate that feminist SF does vitalize feminist discourse through a constant process of re-evaluation and discussion - a process crucial to the survival and growth of materialist feminist projects. In the case of the *The Mists of Avalon*, however, many readers claimed more personally profound, life-changing interpretations of the text, most notably in redefining their own identity as women or their spiritual assumptions.

While it is obvious that *Ammonite* and *Mists* are very different in their appeal and the interpretations they invite, both provide something essential to any oppositional movement: a place to dream. The didactic nature of these texts incites readers to re-examine assumptions and, may in some cases, open the door into new ways of thinking about society or provide a focus for developing feminist identities. While these two texts may not have been 'the books' for everyone, in Julie's words, "who knows what book people come across that does that?" With the presence of an ever-growing feminist SF community, readers can recommend and discover books which may assist them in their journey, and through sharing and discussion of these books, can consolidate their own ideas about feminism and their evolving position within it.

Conclusion

Although limited to two specific cases of feminist SF, this project has attempted to assess the role of this popular literature in broader feminist agendas by investigating the negotiation of meaning at three different levels: the institutions of production, the texts and the readers. Current research into the subversive potential of this genre has concentrated almost exclusively on textual analysis and my own project has aimed to assess the subversive potential of feminist SF at the level of the readers. My ethnographic research into the composition and character of feminist SF readers, although revealing, remains strictly a preliminary analysis. I hope, however, that it serves to inspire other feminist SF enthusiasts to fill in the details of the picture I have begun here.

My investigation of feminist SF in historical perspective reveals the ways in which feminists have appropriated a traditionally masculine genre to play out their own ideas for a new social order. Much of the work accomplished in reclaiming a feminist SF tradition, however, has concentrated on utopian and science fiction writing. There is a need to undertake similar projects for feminist fantasy written before the 1950s and to retrace the contribution of women and feminist writers in this tradition. Given the misogynistic nature of many fairy tales - from Cinderella to Snow White - a search for early fairy tales, folktales or

versions of tales more empowering to women and left undocumented in the Grimm brothers' collection would greatly contribute to feminist SF literature.

The evolution of feminist SF presented in chapter two certainly illustrates the special role of community in the development of the subgenre, especially in the early 1950s when *Star Trek* and Darkover fandom fostered the careers of many women writers. Indeed, Marion Zimmer Bradley discusses the importance of fandom in nurturing new talent and was a devoted SF fan before her own career as a professional SF writer began. Nicola Griffith also talks about her early SF reading experiences and the discovery of feminist SF writers as a feeling of "coming home." Their devotion to the genre despite its perceived lower literary status bespeaks a conviction that SF offers something unique, unavailable in any other literary genre. Moreover, the compatibility of SF with feminist goals is recognized by many women writers from literary circles who have adopted the tropes of SF in their own feminist literary projects (Ursula Le Guin, Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood). Their contribution to feminist SF has significantly undermined allegations that SF is a ghettoized genre. Many SF publishers deliberately attempt to capitalize on this 'cross-over' potential and market SF titles to a larger literary audience, as was the case with *The Mists of Avalon*.

My analysis of the institutions governing the production and marketing of feminist SF suggests that Del Rey essentially treated the publication of *Mists* and

Ammonite just as it would have any other novel in its list. For the most part, the company paid no special attention to the oppositional content of these feminist SF texts. Although the popular judgment would be to assume that this equal treatment is favorable, I feel that special attention to the unique content of feminist SF would facilitate its distribution to appropriate retailers and readers. Thus, while Del Rey did not hinder the production process of *Mists* and *Ammonite*, nor did it particularly facilitate that process. Will these feminist SF texts simply get lost among the multitude of other generic SF novels? Although this is perhaps wishful thinking, as a feminist, I would obviously like to see feminist SF garner special attention from publishers as a unique subgenre.

In the case of *Ammonite*, the generic cover of the first issue was completely unrevealing of the book's content. Aside from some efforts (mainly on Griffith's part) to market *Ammonite* to gay/lesbian and feminist bookstores, Del Rey made no special effort to ensure the book reached an intended audience - if it even had one. As noted by a bookstore owner, Patricia Caven: "I think the publishers actually depend on us a little too much to direct those books to the right market...I think there's an awful lot of books out there that never reach their market because they're not sold by the publisher correctly" (Caven interview). Nonetheless, it is significant to note that *Mists* and *Ammonite* were treated with no less enthusiasm by Del Rey Books than mainstream SF and were subject to

many of the same editorial decisions. A much larger scale investigation would be required to assess the publication conditions of feminist SF within various time frameworks and publishing houses.

However noble in intention, the individualist character of editorial operations at Del Rey must be considered within the confines of a vast publishing company and within the context of recent economic concerns in the SF market. As noted in chapter three, Del Rey is not known for its radical publications. In fact, Del Rey's lists seem to lean toward conservatism. Thus while the company claims to avoid sexist, racist and other offensive material, it is certainly not dedicated to feminism or any other social movement which undermines the status quo. However, its editorial policy based on personal preference leaves room for individual editors to advance their own interests in the context of the commercial industry. Ellen Key Harris admittedly looks for books with "adventurous, self-sufficient heroines" (Harris interview), if not with overt feminist content as I have defined it. But commercial forces still prevail. Patricia Caven noted the recent trend in SF for lesbian content. Publishing *Ammonite*, then, was not a risky enterprise for Del Rey; the imprint was simply profiting from a commercial trend favouring lesbian protagonists, a trend explored by its competitors and proven successful. As noted by Goldman, Heath and Smith: "There is nothing new in entrepreneurs trying to appropriate the

legitimacy of a popular oppositional social movement and transforming those meanings into symbolic currency" (Goldman et al, 1991: 334). These commercial interests thus seem to undermine any oppositional¹ content in these texts, but my ethnographic research of the readers investigates the ways in which they have generated subversive meaning in these popular culture texts.

One more point of special interest arose from my research into the process of production and distribution of feminist SF: the mediating role of the specialty bookstore retailer. Although obviously not generalizable to all bookstore owners, the specific circumstances of the House of Speculative Fiction in Ottawa proved especially interesting for this analysis. Patricia Caven guides and directs her customers to new material she suspects they will enjoy and reviews and recommends certain books. As a dedicated feminist, she consciously promotes feminist SF to readers unfamiliar with the subgenre. She sees herself as a mediator in the "education process which opens people's eyes to different ideas" (Caven interview).

My enthusiasm for Caven's direct intervention should be tempered with the knowledge that many readers in this study did not actually purchase the books under consideration at a bookstore. In the case of *Mists* particularly, many participants indicated that they had either borrowed the book from a friend or received it as a gift. My own suspicion is that *Mists'* continuing success

is due in large part to a process of word of mouth recommendation from reader to reader. This network of readers is indeed significant in assessing the subversive potential of feminist SF and my analysis should perhaps have taken this alternative acquisition pattern into account to a larger degree.

Given the testimony of several focus group participants that *Mists* deeply influenced their own feminist perceptions, the contradiction between Bradley's intentions and the interpretations of the readers becomes even more apparent. In fact, for both *Mists* and *Ammonite*, the majority of the participants believed that Nicola Griffith and Marion Zimmer Bradley had some form of political motivation in writing their respective stories.¹ Griffith admittedly situated her writing within a politically aware tradition of feminist SF, while Bradley shunned the feminist label. Demonstrably then, the relationship between politics and popular fiction should not be informed uniquely by the writer's intentions, but also by the meanings produced by the reader.

I chose to engage with the feminism/postmodernism debate prevalent in much of the feminist SF criticism in order to contest the claims that feminist SF, and indeed SF in general, are postmodern genres. This debate also proves fruitful in illustrating the uneasy relationship between feminism and postmodernism. Moreover, it provides an interesting framework in which to

¹ More specifically, 67 per cent of the internet respondents suggested that the authors had political motivations.

investigate the various strategies used by feminist SF writers to undermine patriarchal discourses. While both books are traditionally realist in form, *Mists* deconstructs the patriarchal meta-narrative of Christianity in the postmodern sense. Bradley reveals the constructed nature of this religion as a mechanism of domination, while providing an alternative, empowering religious model for women. For its part, *Ammonite* dismantles popular ideas about the natural association of women with nature and men with technology. Griffith refuses to engage in the discourse of femininity/masculinity and presents a world in which women are no more and no less than human. However, *Ammonite's* narrative is illustrative of the problems perceived by many feminists in the conflation of postmodernism and feminism. Postmodernism's rejection of the humanist subject undermines feminism's ultimate goals for materialist intervention through human agency. In *Ammonite*, the protagonist embarks on a search for her 'complete self' - a humanist subject grounded in her relationship with others and with her community. Feminism, then, attempts to incorporate the humanist concept of self with the construction of identity in relationship. *Ammonite* illustrates feminist attempts to reconcile the modernist and postmodernist canons and to appropriate concepts from each theoretical stance to construct a hybrid approach.

The last chapter of this thesis engages in conversation with Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* in order to contrast the feminist SF readers in this study to the Smithton readers in her own. While my ethnographic study remains rudimentary, it reveals several ways in which feminist SF readers differ from romance readers. In terms of demographic characteristics, the feminist SF readers in this study included a male minority, while Radway's romance readers were exclusively women. In comparison to the Smithton women, the majority of the feminist SF readers did not have children and some indicated being involved in non-traditional relationships such as living with heterosexual or homosexual partners outside marriage. In general, feminist SF readers had much higher levels of education than Radway's romance readers, worked in professional careers outside the home and indicated little or no affiliation with organized religions.

I have speculated that these demographic characteristics denote motives for reading SF which are entirely different from the compensatory incentives outlined in Radway's work. For example, the domestic situations and high levels of education evident in feminist SF readers suggest that they read for intellectual stimulation as much as for escapism and relaxation. Indeed, a closer investigation of the interpretations and meanings generated by the feminist SF readers suggests that *Mists* and *Ammonite* sometimes challenged their

assumptions or provided an entry point for their engagement with feminist discourses.

While a few participants shunned the feminist label and adopted a 'postfeminist' stance, most feminist SF readers ascribed to some form of feminism. My analysis explored the ways in which this complex relationship with feminist discourses outside the text influenced the subversive potential of feminist SF and the role of this genre in broader feminist political efforts. The focus groups and internet responses revealed that *Ammonite* and *Mists* were read and interpreted in distinct ways. Most readers of *Ammonite* suggested that its engagement with other feminist SF texts and discourses of feminism contributed to a growing literature and culture devoted to the tenets of feminism and women. In other words, *Ammonite* urges its readers to re-evaluate their beliefs and, in the case of readers already sympathetic to feminism, to re-situate themselves within feminist discourse. This text becomes a part of the growing body of literature making up feminist culture. It contributes yet another feminist dream.

The Mists of Avalon, on the other hand, elicited more profound readings and interpretations from several participants in this study. Some women alluded to the book as a 'woman's bible' - a text with multiple levels of meanings revealed at each new reading. Others also suggested that *Mists* made them

question their assumptions about cultural myths, legends or historical accuracy. Thus, both texts in this study are subversive in that they undermine patriarchal discourse by engaging an alternative one: that of feminism. Both texts provide a space for feminists to articulate their dreams of the future and of the past.

The last chapter of this thesis closed with a discussion of the active feminist SF community where readers, critics and writers work at incorporating the imaginary ideas explored in feminist SF into the reality of their own lives. Unlike the mediated and illusory community of romance readers in Radway's study, the feminist SF community has developed in the tradition of science fiction fandom - an environment historically rich with interaction among readers, fans and writers. Participation in the feminist SF community is aided in large part by the internet, but also existed in the form of conventions and fanzines before this electronic technology and still does at present. The texts are obviously a large part of this feminist SF subculture, providing the focus of interest for its participants and a place for them to articulate their dreams of alternative social relations.

Thus, it is in this sense that feminist SF is subversive: it supports the growth and evolution of an oppositional feminist culture. In reading the dreams of feminism, readers may work in subtle ways to make those dreams come true.

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Appendix A

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

The primary research for this study included two focus groups, one designed for each book under scrutiny, as well as a series of questions posted on the internet to various newsgroups, listservers and web sites likely to solicit responses.

Approval

The Carleton University Ethics Committee approved the focus group design and proposal, as well as the internet questions for this study. A copy of the approval letter is included in this appendix.

Focus Groups

Locale and Time Period

The two focus groups were conducted at Mother Tongue Books, a local feminist bookstore. The focus group for *Ammonite* took place on the evening of Wednesday, February 28, 1996, while the group for *Mists of Avalon* occurred a week later on Wednesday, March 6.

Confidentiality and Consent

All participants signed a consent form indicating that they understood the conditions of the study and agreed to participate in the focus group. A copy of the consent form is included in this appendix. The discussions were audio-taped for the purpose of transcription. All focus group participants have been assigned pseudonyms in this paper.

Description

There was no limitation on the participation of men in the focus groups. In fact, I found their presence in both instances to be advantageous. No participants, however, were under the age of eighteen. Although predominantly English speaking and white Canadian, there was some cultural and racial diversity: one person had recently moved to Canada from Great Britain, another was a native of Poland, two were Jewish-Canadian and one, African-Canadian.

Ammonite

The first focus group consisted of five participants: one male and four female. Names and age groups: Julie (19-24), Carol (19-24), Susan (25-34), Tara (45-54) and Alex (25-34).

Of the five participants in this group, three were avid readers of feminist SF, while two were familiar with science fiction, but not feminist SF.

The Mists of Avalon

The second focus group consisted of eleven participants: two male and nine female.

Names and age groups: Matthew (19-24), Gary (19-24), Kate (35-44), Rita (35-44), Kerry (19-24), Sarah (19-24), Alison (45-54), Ashley (25-34), Mary (19-24), Jennifer (35-44) and Eleanor (35-44).

This group was more diversified in age and interests than the *Ammonite* group. At least four of the participants had heard about the project through a women's spirituality group, while others were students from the University who enjoyed the book. Some participants were avid readers of science fiction/fantasy and some had only read *Mists* and approached the book more from a spiritual point of view.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited on a volunteer basis through advertisements in the Carleton University newspaper, *The Charlatan*, through posts on the carleton.general newsgroup and various other course newsgroups, as well as through signs posted on campus and in *The House of Speculative Fiction* and *Mother Tongue Books*. The project was also promoted through word of mouth to various other groups (women spirituality groups in the Ottawa area) interested in *The Mists of Avalon*. Given the wide appeal and popularity of *Mists*, the task of recruiting people for a discussion of the book was greatly facilitated.

In the case of *Ammonite*, however, recruitment was significantly more difficult. As *Ammonite* is a relatively new title, and a first novel, few people in the Ottawa area had actually read the book and of those who had, many may not have been willing to participate in a focus group about it. Thus, I encouraged interested people to participate by offering to give them a copy of *Ammonite* if they were willing to participate in the focus group. Only one person reneged on the agreement. Of the five participants, three were avid readers of feminist SF, but had not previously read *Ammonite*. The nature of this focus group, then, was

quite different from the group dealing with *Mists*. Although three members were avid feminist SF readers, two were unfamiliar with the subgenre and none of the participants had actually chosen to read *Ammonite* without my intervention. Thus the nature of the questions differed from the other focus group. The questions for each focus group are included in this appendix.

While the *Ammonite* focus group examined the subversive potential of the book in depth, the fourteen internet respondents who had read *Ammonite* on their own initiative provided answers to the questions dealing with the choice to read it and a better picture of the readers of feminist SF. In short, they complemented one another.

Conclusion

Overall, the focus groups were very successful. The locale, I think, also contributed to the success of these focus groups. The atmosphere at Mother Tongue Books was particularly conducive to a discussion of books and participants were served hot drinks and doughnuts. In essence, I feel that participants were quite at ease with the situation and thus, more open in their expression of feelings and opinions about the book.

In the case of the *Mists* group, participants were eager to talk about the book and what they liked about it. I understand, however, that their enthusiasm is obviously not shared by everyone who has read *Mists* and their comments, while intelligent and insightful for the most part, should be considered in the context in which they were uttered; that is, within a group of eleven *Mists* enthusiasts. After all, most of the participants were attracted to the project because of their enjoyment of the book.

While more tempered and subdued, the *Ammonite* group also provided interesting comments on feminist SF and the book which they all volunteered to read for the project. Participation in this group was more equal than in the *Mists* group given the number of people in the discussion. In the *Mists* group, a few people tended to dominate the conversation, sometimes inadvertently silencing those who would have disagreed with the ongoing debate. For the most part, however, I think participants were forthcoming in their responses and not afraid to express their own opinion.

Internet Questions

Target groups

The newsgroups to which the questions were posted included rec.arts.sf.written, and rec.arts.sf.fandom. Three listservers received the questions: FEM-BIBLIO, BOOKWOMAN, two listservers devoted to the discussion of feminist literature, and FEM-SF, a private listserver of writers, readers and critics of feminist science fiction. With the permission of Nicola Griffith and the help of Dave Slusher, the questions were also posted on *The Official Nicola Griffith Page*, web address: <http://www.america.net/~daves/ng/>.

Confidentiality and Consent

Responses to the questions were sent to my private e-mail address and participants were informed in advance of the nature of the project. I also assured them that their real names would not be used in this study. A copy of the questions is included in this appendix.

Time Period and Description

All responses were received during a three month period, from December 1995 to February 1996. Twenty respondents had read *The Mists of Avalon*, while fourteen had read *Ammonite*. Due to the number of responses, I will not assign pseudonyms to each respondent. In the text, these respondents are referred to as 'internet respondents' to avoid confusion with focus group participants.

Ammonite

Of the fourteen people who had read *Ammonite*, ten were women and four were men. The age breakdown goes as follows:

Women:	4 were between the ages of 25 and 34
	4 between 35-44
	4 between 45-54
Men:	3 between 25-34
	1 between 45-54

Mists

Of the twenty people who had read *Mists* and responded to my questions, eighteen were women and two were men. The age breakdown goes as follows:

Women: 3 were between the ages of 19-24
 6 between 25-34
 7 between 35-44
 1 between 45-54
 1 between 55-64

Men: 1 between 19-24
 1 between 25-34

Conclusion

Due to the anonymous nature of the internet, it is possible that some of the received responses are inaccurate reflections of the readers of feminist SF. Gender switching, the use of neutral pseudonyms and other deceptions are quite prevalent on this medium. The level of engagement with the questions about feminist SF, however, leads me to believe that these respondents were indeed genuine in their interest in feminist SF and honest in the information they provided.

Nonetheless, I want to stress that this small survey can in no way be considered a scientifically designed random sample of the population or an accurate reflection of all readers of feminist SF. First of all, the sample was limited to people with access to internet technology and of those people, those participating in the targeted newsgroups and listservers and willing to take the time to respond to my questions.

However, the internet was a very useful tool in trying to reach the readers of feminist SF, a very specific subgenre of SF and still quite small in relation to mainstream fantasy literature and technology-centered science fiction. For the most part, respondents were American, but some also lived in the United Kingdoms, Ireland and Australia. Of these respondents, many were familiar with feminist SF as a subgenre (twenty-five out of the thirty-four respondents were familiar with various feminist SF novels and writers) and some were involved in organizing WISCON, the annual conference on feminist science fiction in Wisconsin, U.S.. In essence, I think the internet responses were useful to this study in that they supplied a limited picture of the readers of feminist SF. They complemented the local focus groups nicely.

Carleton
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memorandum

Office of Research Services

DATE: February 15, 1996

TO: Jocelyne Voisin
School of Journalism and Mass Communication

FROM: Anne Burgess
Director of Research Services

RE: Your request for ethics clearance

The Carleton Ethics Committee has reviewed your response to its concerns, and has now given ethical clearance to your project.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Anne Burgess'.

A.B.

c.c. Prof. C. Dornan

CONSENT FORM

I am a graduate student at Carleton University currently doing research for my Masters thesis on the appeal of feminist fantasy and science fiction to readers. Before beginning the group, however, I am required to attain your consent. You are being asked to sign this form to show that you have been informed about what my research entails.

While I don't expect any questions to make you feel uncomfortable, you may choose not to answer at any time in the discussion. The focus group will be recorded, but only to help me to transcribe the discussion later on. Anything said here will be used solely for the purpose of this academic study. Also, your real name will not appear on the transcript, nor will it be used in any of this research.

Jocelyne Voisin, Researcher

Participant

I have read and understood the basis of the research. I understand that my signature in no way constitutes a waiver of my rights, but that I am simply agreeing to participate in this focus group.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS - AMMONITE

- Did you like *Ammonite*? Why or why not?
- How did you find the portrayal of the main character(s) and their relationships in *Ammonite*? How did you feel about the portrayal of Marghe and her relationship with Thenike? How did you feel about the treatment of lesbianism in the book?
- How did you feel about the absence of men in the book?
- Did you like the setting of *Ammonite*? Why?
- What about the plot?
- What do you know about the author or think you know?
- Does SF form the major part of your pleasure reading? What kind of SF? What other kinds of books do you read for pleasure?
- Do you think you would have purchased the book on your own?
- Did you notice the publishing house of *Ammonite*? Do you usually notice the publisher of books you read? If you do, is there a publisher you prefer?
- Do you like the cover of *Ammonite*? When choosing a book, are you attracted by a nice cover? What kind of covers attract your eye?
- When you choose a book, is the author's gender a factor in that choice?
- Would you recommend *Ammonite* to anyone else? To whom? Is there anyone in particular to whom you would not recommend it?
- In your opinion, was there an underlying moral or political message in the book? If so, what do you think Nicola Griffith's political motivations were in writing this story besides personal and artistic ones?
- Why do you think she chose to omit men from the story?
- In your opinion, did this book challenge 'mainstream' values in society?
- Do you think *Ammonite* would have been published 15 years ago? Why or why not?
- Did *Ammonite* change your perspective in any way about the society you live in? How did it affect you?
- How do you perceive feminism as a political movement? Would you identify yourself with any variation of feminism?
- Would you define *Ammonite* as a feminist work of fiction? Why? What do you define as feminist SF?
- Are there any other books you have read that you would classify as feminist fantasy or SF? Which ones?
- What do you think the relationship of science fiction is to real life?
- Do you feel that feminist SF is a good way to help various feminist political projects? In other words, do you think feminist SF changes the way people think about gender relations and patriarchal structures?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS - *THE MISTS OF AVALON*

- What did you like most about *Mists*? What didn't you like?
- How did you feel about the representation of religion in the book?
- Why did you decide to read *Mists*? (for example, recommended by someone, by the bookstore staff, good reviews, author, title, awards, cover) What attracted you?
- Did you recommend the book to anyone else? Who?
- How many times have you read *Mists*? If more than once, why? Did it give you something different each time?
- When did you first read *Mists*? What was the context of the time? How have you changed since then? Would you read it differently now?
- Did you read it as someone who reads a lot of fantasy and sf or as someone who reads mainstream fiction? What other kinds of books do you like to read?
- In your opinion, was there an underlying moral or political message in the book? Do you think Marion Zimmer Bradley had political motivations in writing this story besides personal and artistic ones?
- Would you define it as a feminist work of fiction? Why?
- What do you define as feminist fiction?
- Are there any other books you are familiar with that you would classify as feminist fantasy or SF?
- In your opinion, did *Mists* challenge 'mainstream' values in society at the time that you read it? (keeping in context when the book was read) How do you think it relates to changing values since its publication in 1982?
- Did *Mists* change *your* perspective in any way about the society you live(d) in? How did it affect you?
- How do you perceive feminism as a political movement? Would you identify yourself with any variation of feminism?
- Do you feel that feminist SF is a good way to help various feminist political projects? In other words, do you think feminist SF changes the way people think about gender relations and patriarchal structures such as religion?
- Who do you think *Mists* appeals to?
- What do you think the relationship of fantasy is to real life?

INTERNET QUESTIONS

- Did you like *Mists/Ammonite*? Why or why not?
- How many times have you read *Mists/Ammonite*?
- In your opinion, did this book challenge mainstream values in your society?
- Do you consider yourself a feminist? (I realize there are many different kinds of feminism - the term is used here for convenience)
- Why did you decide to read *Mists/Ammonite*? (for example, recommended by someone, by the bookstore staff, good reviews, author, title, Del Rey Discovery, awards, cover)
- Did you buy *Mists/Ammonite*, did you borrow it from a friend or the library or was it given to you?
- If you bought the book, where did you buy it (specialty science fiction store, feminist bookstore, lesbian/gay bookstore or mainstream bookstore)?
- Do you think Marion Zimmer Bradley/Nicola Griffith had political motivations in writing this story?
- Did *Mists/Ammonite* change your perspective in any way about the society you live in?
- How would you distinguish feminist SF from other science or mainstream fiction?
- Are you familiar with any other feminist SF books? Which ones?
- Does SF form the major part of your pleasure reading? What kind of SF? What other kinds of books do you read?
- How many books do you read a week or a month?
- When you choose a book, do you specifically look for a woman author?
- What proportion of the books you read are written by women?
- Are there things in feminist SF that you can't get in other genres?
- What do you think the relationship of SF is to real life?
- Do you feel that feminist SF is a good way to help feminist political projects? In other words, do you think feminist SF changes the way people think about gender relations and patriarchal structures?
- Do you have friends who also read feminist SF? Do you discuss the books you read with them?
- Have you ever attended an SF convention? Which one(s)?
- Do you read any SF related magazines? Which ones?
- Do you enjoy any SF television programs or films? Which ones?

PERSONAL DATA:

- Sex? M F
- Age group? a)15-18 b)19-24 c)25-34 d)35-44 e)45-54 f)55-64 g)65+

- **Current 'marital' status?**
 - a) single (never married)
 - b) married (heterosexual or homosexual)
 - c) separated / divorced (and not remarried)
 - d) living with partner, life-mate (heterosexual or homosexual)
 - e) widowed
- **Do you have children? If yes, how many?**
- **What is your current occupation?**
- **What is your religious preference?**
- **How many years of education have you completed?**
 - a) less than 8
 - b) some high school
 - c) graduated high school
 - d) some college / university (less than 2 years)
 - e) graduated college / university
 - f) some graduate work
 - g) Master's degree
 - h) Ph.D.

Appendix B

BOOK COVERS

1. *The Mists of Avalon*, Del Rey - Front Cover260
2. *The Mists of Avalon*, Del Rey - Back Cover 261
3. *Ammonite*, Del Rey, First Issue - Front Cover262
4. *Ammonite*, Del Rey, First Issue - Back Cover 263
5. *Ammonite*, Del Rey, Second Issue - Front Cover264
6. *Ammonite*, Del Rey, Second Issue - Back Cover 265

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perspective of the women.*

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*Masterfully plotted and beautifully written,
The Mists of Avalon sheds new light on the characters,
especially Morgan of the Faerie. Morgan, Lancelot
and Guinevere. An epic novel of magic, love,
fantastical loyalties and haunting enchantments.*

Publishers Weekly

*A most original interpretation of the
Matter of Britain by way of Celtic religion and the
Great Mother—a remarkable feat of imagination!*

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Appendix C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - NICOLA GRIFFITH

According to Ellen Key Harris, you were left to market Ammonite more or less on your own. What marketing strategies did you use?

Who was your principal target for this marketing?

Were you happy with the reviews for Ammonite? Were there any that really angered you?

How do you feel about the role of reviews in book publishing and selling?

Did you encounter difficulties trying to publish (in general) as a woman and as a lesbian writer?

Did you consider a lesbian or feminist book publishing company for Ammonite before trying mainstream SF companies?

My edition of Ammonite is the reissue put out by Del Rey to match Slow River with the blue ammonite on the cover. What did the first cover look like?

Do you think a company like Del Rey would have published Ammonite 15 years ago?

Who do you imagine your readership to be? Who do you write for (besides yourself, of course)?

Do you have at least partial political goals in writing feminist SF?

Do you think feminist SF contributes to feminist/lesbian politics? According to you, is it a valid form for cultural intervention?

SF readers are usually characterized as being more open to diversity etc. In this sense, do you think Ammonite challenges those conceptions of society or are they already more liberal-minded? In other words, are you 'preaching to the converted'?

Do you think feminist SF has expanded the SF market:

There is a burgeoning market in television and film for SF. What possibility do you think may exist for a less phallocentric SF trend in mainstream popular culture?

Obviously, you are active on-line. Do you feel it offers more direct ways to relate to your fans and readers than traditional conventions and book signings?

Are you or were you ever involved in fandom? What do you think of the phenomenon?

What do you think of the classification by some authors of SF as a 'ghetto-ized' genre? Does being a SF author limit your market reach?

What do you think of the current movement in feminist SF scholarship to associate feminist SF with postmodernism?

How do you see yourself within the feminist SF tradition which preceded you?

Where do you think that tradition is going?

What inspired Jeep?

What do you hope your readers get from Ammonite?

Anything I left out that you think I really need to know?

Appendix D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - ELLEN KEY HARRIS

What was the first feminist sf book published by Del Rey? What year approximately?

When did Del Rey begin including a significant amount of feminist sf in their lists?

What percentage of the authors published last year were women (not necessarily feminist) as compared to ten years ago?

Who do you imagine the audience of feminist sf books to be?

Why doesn't Del Rey do any market research?

Does Del Rey try to publish a certain number of books in each subgenre (hard sf, high fantasy, feminist) each month or year?

How many editors at Del Rey are women? Do you think it makes a difference in the kind of books that get published?

In terms of economics, what percentage of royalties are paid to new authors? Do these authors get advances?

Is the Del Rey distribution network only North American or international?

What are the current sales figures for *Mists* and *Ammonite*?

Who 'discovered' *The Mists of Avalon*? Was it in the 'slush' pile? What were the conditions of its purchase (I mean payment to the author etc.)?

Do you think that *Mists* created a market rather than catered to an already known readership?

Why did Del Rey decide to publish *Mists* in trade paperback? Was it the first book to be published by Del Rey in this format?

Approximately how many printings has *Mists* had? Has the cover art changed?

What do you think accounts for its consistently high sales over the decade?

How was *Mists* marketed? What were the 'selling points'? Was it really pushed by the publicists? Was it distributed mostly to specialty stores at first or mainstream book stores?

What audience did you feel *Ammonite* would appeal to when you discovered it in your slush pile? What were the selling points you suggested to your editor-in-chief?

Did this type of novel have 'a proven track record in the market or disadvantages'? What 'niche' did it fill?

What was the criteria to begin a second printing and why did Del Rey change the cover art for *Ammonite* at this time?

What were the conditions of purchase for *Ammonite*?

In the DRIN of August 1995, your publicist gives a detailed description of the marketing for *SLOW RIVER*, Nicola's latest book. Was a similar approach taken for *Ammonite*? In what ways did the fact that *Ammonite* was her first novel affect the marketing approach? Was Nicola's overt lesbian stance played up for media attention?

Was *Ammonite* distributed to feminist, science fiction and mainstream book stores equally? What about other outlets?

Do you think that *Ammonite* would have been published by Del Rey ten years ago?

How do you see the market and the publishing of speculative fiction developing (in terms of subgenres etc)?

Do you think that the growing body of feminist sf has contributed to the expansion of the sf market?

Appendix E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - PATRICIA CAVEN

What is your definition of feminist SF?

What do you consider feminist fantasy?

Do you consider yourself an exception as a woman SF bookstore owner?

What proportion of your customers are women?

Tell me about the segregation of male and female authors in the store.

Do your customers often ask about their favourite authors?

Who do you think makes up the market for feminist SF?

What do you perceive your role in the process of marketing SF to be?

How often do you recommend books?

What makes you decide to recommend a book to your customers?

Are there certain publishers more likely to publish feminist SF? What about Del Rey?

What role do you think book covers play in selling books?

What do you think accounts for *Mists*' consistently high sales?

What appeal does *Mists* have in your opinion?

Do you think *Mists* created a market rather than catered to one?

What proportion of the books you receive would you classify as feminist SF?

How do you think women SF writers have changed the genre?

Where do you see SF going as a genre?

END

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FIN