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## **Why speculate – the current state of 'spec-fic' publishing**

### Abstract:

This collaborative paper explores how the 'spec-fic' category may be responding to contemporary political and environmental challenges. It presents two case studies, in the personal writing and professional publishing experiences of authors Rose Michael and Cat Sparks, to consider the ways speculative fiction engages with real-world concerns. The paper acknowledges the genre's contested relationship to harder-to-categorise cross-genre or interstitial forms of non-realist fiction, as well as its obvious antecedents in science fiction and its arguable overlap with 'big L' literature. As creative practitioners and published authors who dis/identify with generic labels in different ways, the authors contend that the use, misuse, and abuse of genre conventions has been, and continues to be, personally and professionally productive – particularly in a contemporary publishing landscape impacted by changes to technology and platforms that have transformed traditional relationships and roles.

### Biographical notes:

Currently Lecturer in Writing and Publishing at RMIT, Rose Michael, PhD, was previously commissioning editor at Hardie Grant Books and co-founded and directed micro-press Arcade Publications 2007-2012 after having been editor of the national trade press magazine *books + publishing*. She has been published in *Griffith Review*, *Best Australian Stories*, *Island*, *Cultural Studies Review*, *Review of Australian Fiction*, *Sydney Review of Books*, and *Meanjin*. Her first novel, *The Asking Game*, was a runner-up for the Vogel's Literary Award and received an Aurealis honourable mention. Her second novel, *The Art of Navigation*, is published by UWAP. [www.rosemichael.com.au](http://www.rosemichael.com.au)

Cat Sparks is a multi-award-winning Australian author and artist, and formerly Fiction Editor of *Cosmos Magazine*. She is currently finishing a PhD examining the intersection between ecocatastrophe science fiction and climate fiction. She directed speculative fiction festivals at the NSW Writer's Centre in

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## Introduction

'Fantasy plus literary fiction can achieve things that frank blank realism can't', so David Mitchell told *The New York Times* (Alter 2015) when approached for background to an interview with Kazuo Ishiguro, adding that he hoped Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* would 'de-stigmatise' fantasy. This was at odds with Ishiguro's own position: Ishiguro is an author who has worked hard to avoid being called a genre writer, worrying in that same article that readers would not 'follow him' in his latest foray – to Arthurian Britain.

To appreciate what literary writers such as Ishiguro (and indeed Mitchell) are doing is to recognise how a force is being applied to the current literary mode. Genre is widely acknowledged as flexible, responding to the historical context of the imaginative work in question. A current interest in speculative novels with literary foundations may indicate a movement away from the realism of Jonathan Franzen and Zadie Smith into imaginative territory that could prove liberating; as writers, we have found these possibilities personally revelatory and profoundly rewarding. James Wood argues that 'everything flows from the real, including the beautiful deformations of the real; it is realism that *allows* surrealism, magic realism, fantasy, dream and so on' (Wood 2004: ix), but other critics argue that everything flows from the fantastic, that all fiction has *always been* speculative. For example, Anthony Wolk paraphrases Doris Lessing's suggestion that, 'the current mode of "realistic" fiction of the last two hundred years is the aberration and that fantastic literature is the mainstream which has never run dry and still flows freely' (1990: 26).

What is clear to us is that the movement between the 'real' – however that might be defined – and the speculative is a source of great energy and inspiration. For us, the high-art verses low-brow debate that pits literary fiction against popular genre forms is reinvigorated in this context: not reversed or resolved, but made productive for our creative practice. We are not academically interested in which category came first, or has the greater value, but rather how the friction between the literary and more speculative, even 'science' fictions, can (be made to) work. To explicitly contextualise ourselves, Rose Michael – author of *The Asking Game* (Transit Lounge, 2007), runner-up for the Vogel's Literary Award and shortlisted for the Aurealis Award, and *The Art of Navigation* (UWAP, 2017) – has been published in literary magazines such as *Island*, *Griffith Review*, *Meanjin*, and *Overland*, while Cat Sparks – author of *Lotus Blue* (Talos, 2017) – is a multi-award-winning author with strong genre affiliations: formerly fiction editor of *Cosmos Magazine*, she directed speculative fiction festivals at the NSW Writer's Centre in 2015 and 2017, and is a regular panellist at science fiction conventions, festivals and events.

In a 1995 introduction to his disturbingly prescient novel *Crash*, first published in 1973, JG Ballard speculates that the balance between fiction and reality has changed; increasingly, according to him, the roles are reversed: 'The fiction is there, the writer's job is to invent the reality' (Ballard 1995: 1). The 'reality' which is 'invented' in *Crash* is so far from most readers' experience that Ballard's quote must be read as playful, but his comment does seem to capture commercial publishers' interest in commissioning realist works. Perhaps stories

concerned with fundamentally speculative content may be increasing in popularity – or on the rise among practitioners – as a reaction to this strange-and-getting-stranger world. A political and ecological environment where science fiction is increasingly becoming science fact could prompt producers and consumers to seek out more fantastic forms as a 'prudent and effective' (to use Ballard's terms) creative response.

Just as classification is not necessarily productive, neither are re- or new classifications. Whether undertaken by readers (consciously or not), reading communities and academics, or publishers who need categorisations and comparisons in order to convince acquisitions meetings as well as to clone success, trying to define genres may result in reinforcing borders that are always in the process of being redrawn. The effort itself redefines the very boundaries whose movement has prompted the defensive shoring up of genre walls. We agree with John Frow that 'the point, in any case, is not to assign [the example] to one or more genres, but rather to notice its provocation of the question about what kind of thing it is, a provocation which, however forcefully it unsettles generic norms, never takes us to some point beyond that question' (2005: 111). For us, attempting to fix something that is constantly in flux is valuable only insofar as it helps us – as writers and researchers – to identify new opportunities for imaginative transgressions.

### Terms of reference

'As soon as the word "genre" is sounded,' writes Jacques Derrida, 'as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn' (1980: 56); one which producer and consumer alike may wish to redraw. If we (attempt to) define a genre, if we can agree what constitutes it, we are as good as sounding a challenge. Any consensus may only prove, as Joanna Russ writes, that the 'material' in question is already 'exhausted' and worn out (1971). In 'Wearing out of Genre Materials', Russ details how popular genre writers introduce new marvels, and explore their plausibility, before they're assimilated, adopted or 'stolen' by the dominant mode. Frow, too, sees genre as 'the driving force of change in the literary field' (2005: 68), arguing that genres test the limits of shared values and who we are, as well as of writing and reading practices. This is true for all subgenres of the novel, from the literary to the less so: any rule is at once a disabler and an enabler, a fence for some, and, for others, a new frontier to explore.

If genres only have meaning in terms of the shifting differences between them, as Frow argues, then genre classification relies on knowing other genres, and having the reading confidence to respond to 'provocation'. What is true for literary fiction, in terms of its relationship to other genres, is also true for commercial forms: as Russ says, 'Genre fiction, like all fiction, is a compromise' (1971: 46). Frow's argument is equally, especially, true when it comes to the 'conversation', even 'intense argument' (2000: 224) – as Martin Amis puts it – of literary fiction. For the purposes of this paper, we adopt the following terms: Ken Gelder's expression, 'big L' literature, for works we recognise as genre's Other (Gelder describes the 'other' of popular fiction as 'best conceived as the opposite of Literature' (2014: 11)); 'litfict', from China Mieville's conception of realist Booker prize-winning books (Crown 2011); 'slipstream', for literary fiction that does 'the work' of science fiction, according to Bruce Sterling's description, that is, producing a sense of estrangement (1989); and the generally pejoratively received label 'cli-fi' simply to categorise fiction explicitly concerned with our changing environment. We have agreed upon 'speculative fiction' as the most neutral way of describing all books that contain non-realist content, regardless of how their authors self-identify – writing that might even, at least playfully, be seen as fulfilling Derrida's (very 'spec-fic') image of 'the boundary of the set [which] comes to form, by invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole' (1980: 59).

According to Derrida, the law of genre is ultimately 'a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy' (1980: 59); thus, borders are not necessarily bent by 'impure' works. The literary category may not be polluted by speculative fantasies such as Ishiguro's – indeed, such genre experimentations might even be said to constitute the Frowian core of the category, hence destigmatising the generic material that, as Russ might say (fully intending the double meaning), is worn out. This is why we, who cross the boundaries of 'weird fiction' (a subset of speculative fiction containing works that lean toward the surreal and gothic) and 'science fiction' (a subgenre explicitly concerned with scientific advances and technological explorations) – both categories that have their own extensive and articulated histories – have come to see ourselves as, ultimately, genre loyalists. As writers and publishers, practitioners and academics, we are interested in reflecting and reporting back from the frontlines on what is happening in speculative fiction writing and publishing, why, and where we might be heading. We believe our identification with literary and science fiction traditions (for Michael and Sparks, respectively) does not skew our perspective on the current spec-fic climate but rather provides valuable insight for other producer-consumers who may similarly identify or seek creative solutions through acts of dis-identification.

As for 'science fiction' itself, the difficulty of describing common attributes may be particularly true of this broad – across time, as well as in style – category that is so concerned with change, and the imagined advent and impact of new technologies. As Wolk says, echoing the other theorists named here, 'you do, in fact, pretty much know what science fiction is' (1990: 26). He points out that it is the boundaries – which demark what is *not* science fiction; what is literary – that stand in need of definition. We find Darko Suvin's conception of science fiction as a literature of 'cognitive estrangement' as the most valuable description (1979: 4). We even entertained the idea of hyphenating the term here to emphasise its compound nature – and perhaps subtly oppose the literary fiction designation – but our inner editors overrode the creative writers in us. For us, science fiction offers any different world – whether an alternate present, imagined past or projected future – that gives readers a new perspective from which to (re)view their and our own. Though it, too, as Farah Mendelsohn puts it, is 'less a genre ... than an ongoing discussion' (quoted in Roberts 2006: 24): one that speculative fiction writers and publishers, as well as readers, and academics, participate in.

### Current context

Ideas concerning the mobility of genre are not only evidenced in the recent work of highly inventive literary writers with a visible interest in genre shifts, but may also be seen closer to home – within Australia and perhaps in particular our small-press publishing network: think of titles such as Jane Rawson's *From the Wreck* (Transit Lounge, 2017), Shaun Prescott's *The Town* (Brow Books, 2017), and Angela Meyer's *A Superior Spectre* (Ventura Press, 2018). A number of academics have recently been turning their attention to the role these niche outlier literary producers play, and, indeed, the financial as well as political importance of genre worlds.

Mark Davis asserted some time ago how the current, challenging publishing environment means that – for a range of reasons which are neither exclusively local nor solely about literature, from globalisation to deregulation – 'almost no major Australian publisher [by which he means those commonly referred to as 'the big five' since the merger of Penguin Random House] is aggressively seeking or promoting new literary fiction at the forefront of their lists, and literary fiction [is] no longer the cornerstone of the industry's self-perception' (2006: 94). In a later piece, Davis identified the important part small presses such as

Giramondo and Transit Lounge have to play in contributing to the cultural conversation (2013). Emmett Stinson has pointed out that small publishers often themselves work across genres as their writers and readers are frequently both consumers and producers (2016). (As with us: we are writers, publishers, readers and researchers.) In the case of Giramondo and Transit Lounge, the publishers are also an academic and a poet, respectively. The point is that the level of commercial uncertainty may have resulted in some large publishers increasing their reliance on conservative titles, and that the potential might exist for small publishers, with lower overheads and greater institutional capacity for risk, to offer cross-genre writers (such as ourselves) the opportunity to reach an emerging readership.

While many large publishers have published what could be seen as an emerging Australian literature of the Anthropocene, including James Bradley's *Clade* (Penguin), Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (Allen & Unwin) and Mireille Juchau's *The World Without Us* (Bloomsbury), nonetheless, titles published by small and independent publishers have gone on to take out an increasing number of prestigious awards and play an important role for writers (like ourselves) looking to find a home for manuscripts that fuse the literary and speculative. Indeed, Stinson has suggested that small and independent publishers have become 'the primary agents for disseminating Australian literary works' (2016: 27). In 2018, Jane Rawson won the (genre) Aurealis Award before being longlisted for the (prestigious literary) Miles Franklin Literary Award, for which the less-obviously-speculative *Storyland*, described by its author Catherine McKinnon as variously 'timeslip' or 'time shift', was shortlisted. Other independent publishers have also been experimenting with crossover titles: examples such as Elizabeth Tan's *Rubrik* (Brio, 2017), Briohny Doyle's *The Island Will Sink* (Brow Books, 2016), and Krissy Kneen's *An Uncertain Grace* (Text, 2017) and *Wintering* (Text, 2018) evidence the important role small presses play as agents for disseminating experimental works that are either literary with speculative aspects (according to Sterling's conception) or speculative with literary devices (according to Stinson's perception).

In his study of twenty-seven literary titles from 2012, Stinson found many exhibited aspects of the commercial genres of crime, thriller and romance, and pointed out that 'since AustLit [a database on Australian writers and writing] records no "literary" category ... tracking literary titles in the database is an oblique process of excluding novels that have been tagged with generic designation' (25). Sterling writes disparagingly of 'categories' – which he sees as distinct from more fluid and writer-identifying genres – but for publishers these are a practical necessity: the concrete way in which genres must be literally arranged, in terms of where they are shelved and how their data is entered. Stinson's investigation may even suggest that the literary category has escaped certain pressures precisely because it is not easily, consistently, or commercially identifiable – the sales-data monitoring service Nielsen BookScan is silent on the sales of literary fiction: the subgenres it identifies are the bigger-selling non-fiction categories. For his research, Stinson considers the various paratextual and epitextual aspects that work together to establish which genres specific titles belong to – from publishers' marketing materials to reviews and prizes, which are not so obviously within the producer's control. He concludes by suggesting that there is 'a new class of populist or popular (depending on your view point) genres that are being infused with literary devices and techniques that historically have been associated with "high cultural" works' (2016: 28). Whether the writing itself is new, or the perception and/or categorisation, is a moot point, and not one we wish to explore here.

There are echoes of Joanna Russ in any speculation that 'genuine novelty' (1971: 51) arises at the coalface of genre practice: on the outer rim of generic proliferation. While the major publishers' focus on popular markets may have arguably narrowed the field to the frustration of many writers and readers, and the decline of the literary paradigm supports the theory that

literary fiction is, as Davis says, 'one genre among many' (2006: 103), it is hardly worn out. We see it as being invigorated from the margins. As Frow says, that is where limits are inevitably tested – especially, we posit, in a publishing environment experiencing radical change in term of production as well as (methods of) reader engagement. While Russ explicitly locates such experimentation in bad or undistinguished work, this is clearly not the case with Ishiguro and Mitchell. Frow's argument that genre is a 'force' working on the literary field – the 'driving force of change' (2005: 68) – may be a more useful way of anticipating how such novel projects might feed back into and inform and inspire literary – and our own – fictions.

While genre is a theoretical approach to understanding the relationships between literary and not-so-literary texts – as well as understanding reading communities and publishing practices – reconceiving genres may be one way of investigating and articulating changing contexts and perhaps even proposing a practical, or at least personal and creative, solution to the dire state Davis describes. General fiction readers and writers may be more curious and inclusive than catalogues and commissioning editors give them credit for, as the success of books like Mitchell's and Ishiguro's attests – and recent literary prizes suggest local cultural gatekeepers may be similarly open. But Australia's book industry is commercially a very small and highly competitive market, dominated by a handful of multinational companies that rely on BookScan to make local publishing decisions. Independent presses also subscribe to the sales-tracking system that not only has no 'literary' category, but at one point didn't gather data from the majority of independent booksellers – the main outlet for such fiction. Even though the weighted sample of independent bookstores represented in the dataset has increased to around 26 percent (in 2016), the principal still applies. Now it is ebooks and online sales through etailers such as Amazon and Book Depository that escape BookScan's detection. This is why Malcolm Knox held it responsible for the declining sales – and resultant drop-off in production – of literary fiction (2005).

The difficulties that face the most easily identifiable examples of what Gelder describes as 'big L' literature only increase when it comes to publishing literary fiction that is even less clearly categorisable. Works that could be the saving grace of the genre have been the driving force of transformation: they are fantastic, speculative, or science-inspired provocations that are not only imaginative, but aesthetically and intelligently so. Books that cross the space between the literary section of the bookstore and other shelves, such as the works of Mitchell and Ishiguro, Rawson and Kneen, have more to offer than the history of their generic parts or the future of their hybrid natures. At once unique, but with familiar aspects, they reflect and refract a radically changed (environmentally, politically, technically) and changing 'unreal' reality.

In the following section, titled 'What is happening', Rose Michael discusses how the publishing experience surrounding her novel *The Asking Game* provided a first-hand education in the 'law' of genre, which she then channelled into the creative practice research that produced *The Art of Navigation*. Then, in 'How it is working', Cat Sparks details the ways in which her novel *Lotus Blue* fulfils and defies – current, and historical – generic expectations. Together, these reports of personal and professional experience on the productive adoption and resistance of genre conventions, suggest that such experiments are appropriate, even essential (for these artists), when dealing with contemporary political and environmental challenges.

## What is happening: Rose Michael

It seems to me – as an emerging writer and early career academic, but also a lifetime reader of just such works – that many recent works of literary fiction exhibit aspects of speculative forms: whether fantasy, science fiction, or some more-novel ‘un-real’ kind. I started my PhD by considering recent titles from bestselling international authors such as Kazuo Ishiguro, David Mitchell and Michel Faber: books I loved, books like the ones I want to write. As my candidature progressed, I turned to publishing research (mining my own professional experience and connections) to consider works from independent presses closer to home that similarly seemed to align with non-realist traditions, from Steven Amsterdam’s *Things We Didn’t See Coming* (Sleepers, 2009) to Lisa Jacobson’s *The Sunlit Zone* (Five Islands Press, 2012) – the first of which was published by a friend from a writing group, the second of which was one of the shortlisted titles the year I co-judged the Victorian Premiers’ unpublished manuscript award. I was interested not so much in whether authors embraced or resisted such associations, but in *why* writers of literary fiction might be producing works that slipped between streams – something I had learnt publishers rarely embraced and generally resisted – particularly now.

My thinking was informed by Bruce Sterling’s notion of ‘slipstream’ literature, a term he coined to describe works that were clearly literary but exhibited speculative aspects (1989). He did this in order to argue that ‘the work’ of science fiction – what Ursula Le Guin has described as the genre’s ‘characteristic gesture’ of estrangement (2016), which provides readers and writers with a place from which to review their world – was being done by literary fiction. As Le Guin puts it, ‘a close correspondence of the real world and the fictional world is a defining characteristic of realism. It is not a defining characteristic of fiction’ (2015). I wondered what the usefulness of such a term might be, for writers. Many on Sterling’s list, most famously Margaret Atwood, had, like Ishiguro, resisted such generic associations, but I found herself responding quite differently when such a designation was applied to my own work.

Jenny Green describes slipstream as ‘the cover required for literary fiction to venture into a world of aliens, or monsters, without losing its credibility’ (2016). I consciously adopted this slippery cover, after writing my debut, and found it liberating creatively and professionally – freeing me to embark on a less ‘credible’ non-commercial adventure. Just as speculative fiction is recognised via unspoken agreement among booksellers and buyers – according to distinct, but still debatable, characteristics – so the genre of literary fiction is also formally produced, reproduced, and manufactured (made credible, if you like) in ways that include but are not limited to a text’s intrinsic, essential qualities. As a ‘literary’ author of ‘weird’ fiction, I have a vested interest in the mobility of genre: specifically, in understanding *how* titles can cross over or fall between these two different, yet not always clearly differentiated, categories. I explore this here in the context of my two novels.

Literary fiction, by its very definition, may be that which is difficult to define. ‘What is literary fiction, after all?’ pondered Stephen Romei when a Macquarie University study of the publishing industry, overseen by cultural economist David Throsby with the involvement of the Australia Council, revealed last year – to no publisher’s surprise – that of the 48 per cent of participants in focus groups and respondents to an online survey by Roy Morgan who said they were ‘interested’ in it, a bare 15 per cent were actually ‘reading’ it. [1] Both these groups might concur with Ken Gelder’s description of works of literary fiction as those that are ‘serious, contemplative, unique, “universal”’ (2000: 114), though his terms are imprecise and any description is ultimately disputable.

Literary fiction – what it is, and isn't – may be the product of consensus, but it is often unconscious, frequently precarious, and perhaps inevitably transgressed. 'Big L' literature (to use Gelder's expression) (2014: 11) has always assimilated ideas and forms from wherever writers find inspiration, it's just that its works are – in the words of Gérard Genette – 'simultaneously (and intentionally) aesthetic and technical' (1991: 51). According to Genette, the key attribute of literary fiction is quality: of writing, of ideas, and of the writing/writer's ability to incorporate and experiment with those.

Literary fiction is, first and foremost, that which is *not* commercial genre fiction. Literary fiction aspires to the canonical, defined by Harold Bloom as 'authoritative in our culture' (1991: 1). His sense of who 'we' might be is, of course, open to question and defiantly non-diverse. But Bloom, a conservative critic, also writes of a distinctive 'strangeness', 'a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange' (1991: 3). Bloom was not writing about genre (he was writing in defence of the mostly Western and male canon), but his comments about strangeness – echoing Le Guin's emphasis on estrangement – are relevant to any argument about the current movement between established 'generic' forms, and the increasing significance of *speculative* fictions for literary titles.

I agree with Le Guin that realism is no essential aspect of literary fiction (Le Guin 2015), despite China Miéville's convincing argument that the Booker Prize is actually a genre prize for 'realist litfict' (Crown 2011). Miéville pits this 'literature of recognition' against his preferred 'literature of estrangement' to productively reconceive literary-versus-genre (or, as it is sometimes framed, the high-art versus low-brow) debate for my own interest in how other forms and traditions might be used to strengthen and extend, rather than threaten or diminish, literary works.

However, I personally see 'unreal' award-winning books by established literary authors complicating any easy categorisation of contemporary literary fiction as primarily realist. Realism might rather be a defining characteristic of the new literary 'Middlebrow', [2] and literary fiction more likely than ever to show evidence of slipstream experimentation. For writers such as Ishiguro (and me, perhaps) liminality may not threaten literariness, but rather negate a possible middlebrow market. Literary fiction – which is, after all, always in flux – is recognised by readers and writers, publishers and academics, not in terms of what it *is*, but how it works: what it 'does', to use Sterling's term, and how it responds – 'intentionally' and 'aesthetically', as Genette might say – to a changing climate.

As the repetition of terms makes clear, this discussion is not new: Joanna Russ, too, divided writing into that which was 'about things as they characteristically are or were ... and [that which was about things] as they may be or might have been' (1971: 54). Miéville, however, is trying to define the category of literary fiction itself, which we have already established is inherently unstable, even if it does operate as a recognisable genre. He goes on to point out that while science fiction novels *can* appear on the Booker shortlist, they are generally not called genre fiction in that context (or, indeed, once they are shortlisted) – though the examples he cites, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, are fraught: as already noted, those authors have worked hard to ensure they are not identified as genre writers. David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks* is another example – 'The book doesn't care if it's science fiction,' Mitchell says (2015), conjuring a wonderful act of anthropomorphism that could belong to either spec-fic or the gothic, imagining a sensate if not sensitive book that, in Mitchell's words, 'doesn't give a damn about genre'. In direct contrast to Ishiguro, Mitchell embraces his generic connections, describing genre snobbery as



a 'bizarre act of self-mutilation' – his choice of words nicely articulating what we already know: the literary genre always has (had) generic aspects.

I became interested in the outlier edges of conventional literature when I saw a phrase repeated in two rejection letters from different publishers for my first novel, *The Asking Game*. The difficulty, each publisher said, would be in 'how to position and market it'. This was, they explained, because it was both 'literary' and 'speculative': written in an 'intentionally aesthetic' way but exhibiting 'generic' aspects. I agreed; this was also an accurate description of the books that engaged me, such as Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* and Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New Things*, which I had not previously recognised as a particular type since they operated on the cusp of literary fiction and other genres. Reading these reports made me explicitly realise that stories which cross the literary and speculative genres hold special interest for me and, possibly – hopefully – other readers.

I became conscious of how my own interests as a novelist had always been generically oriented, and flexible: while I read, write and teach literary fiction, I take great pleasure in popular forms that more obviously propel writers and more commercially compel readers. In particular, I am interested in books that introduce an idea – usually a fantastic or scientific concept – that seems, at least fleetingly, to be a possible, literal, answer to the questions raised by the text, as in Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*, or a metaphor made real, as in the case of Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*. By the time it came to writing my new novel, *The Art of Navigation*, I consciously identified as a 'weird fiction' writer – writing a dissertation on cross-genre fiction; researching evidence of slipstream experimentation in mainstream literary fiction – and when I came to a particular plot conundrum I turned to the genres I was working with, and in, and through, to find the answer from their various traditions.

### How it is working: Cat Sparks

'Spec-fic' is hardly new. The term 'speculative fiction' was first used in 1889, in a review of Edward Bellamy's novel 'Looking Backward' in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (Ellis 2014), though the origin is more commonly credited to Robert Heinlein's 1947 essay, 'On the Writing of Speculative Fiction' (2011: 219), in which he specifically discusses the writing of science fiction. The term was further popularised by Judith Merrill in a series of anthologies published in the 1960s: Merrill defined the fiction she wanted to promote as 'speculative fiction: stories whose objective is to explore, to discover, to *learn*, by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper experimentation, something about the nature of the universe, of man, or "reality"' (1966: 60).

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* – a collection of poems written in cuneiform on clay tablets – begins with the enticing words 'He who saw the Deep'. Semi-divine superhero Gilgamesh, accompanied by his fashioned-from-mud wild-man buddy Enkidu, has many adventures on his path to wisdom and maturity, such as a Cedar Forest battle with a giant monster results in environmental destruction, and there is reference to a great deluge, a major ecological catastrophe that wiped misbehaving humans from the earth. This work is often called the first great masterpiece of literature. Four thousand years later, speculative fiction – stories engaging with concepts that go beyond regular reality – still flourishes and prospers as a way of seeing, and showing, 'the Deep'.

Eighteenth-century culture produced not only the empirical realist novel, but also the 'weird' literature of technologically saturated societies – as Roger Luckhurst describes science fiction in his Polity Press volume *Science Fiction* (2005: 3) – which emerged from the social foundries of the Industrial Revolution. Today's climate fiction can be seen as a direct by-

product of those industries; a literature of an earth transformed by global warming and its associated effects, emerging in response to real-world ecological devastation and the extinctions of multiple species resulting from catastrophic climate change.

I see science fiction as a form of mythology – one running in the opposite temporal direction to folklore and myths, such as Gilgamesh: forwards rather than backwards. The term 'speculative fiction' is often employed as a means of camouflage, a way of nestling science fiction stories alongside literary expressions that are considered more respectable – those with 'big L' literary credentials, including magic realism, with its impressive South American pedigree; fairy tales, with their inherent cultural value; and alternate history, which is still realistic in expression, divergent rather than wholly fantastical, examining what plausibly might have transpired if, say, the Third Reich had been triumphant.

Le Guin discusses the current period as a time of 'broadening in the sense of a much larger collective conviction about who's entitled to tell stories, what stories are worth telling, and who among the storytellers gets taken seriously ... not only in terms of race and gender, but in terms of what has long been labelled "genre" fiction' (2016). She continues: 'I believe that some of the most innovative, deep, and beautiful fiction being written today is shelved in bookstores in the science-fiction section.' But some readers do not respond well to forms of fiction set even fractionally outside the boundaries of real life – or realism. In a recent article, 'The Genre Effect', Gavalier and Johnson, using sample texts identical apart from setting-establishing words like 'diner' and 'space station', document how any text identified as science fiction is automatically assumed to be less worthwhile by readers, who therefore devote less effort to reading or understanding it than they would to a realist narrative, to create a self-fulfilling prophecy (2017). Substituting an alternative term like spec-fic is an attempt to push past such genre cringe, which is a carryover from the taint science fiction acquired during its Golden Age (1938-46) of prolific, popular, pulp-fiction magazines.

Science fiction has evolved into a sophisticated literature resonating and engaging with contemporary culture, reflecting significant social and political concerns, but it's still sometimes dismissed as childish – often by those who don't read it, perhaps presuming that little has changed since its heyday. When *The Bookseller* published an obituary of publisher Livia Gollancz, intending to recognise the professional contribution made by her and her father, founder Victor Gollancz, the text included a dismissal of the Gollancz imprint as 'merely a science fiction imprint.' (Thompson 2018). Orion Group Publisher Jon Wood responded with an open letter decrying the statement as 'offensive to my colleagues; our authors and fans; our reviewers and bloggers; fellow SFF publishers and to the wider genre community,' going on to state 'to air such a definitive bias against genre fiction in the obituary of our former owner was troubling and frankly insulting' (Wood 2018).

Literary fiction considers itself concerned with serious issues, focusing on inner rather than outer space: on truth and tangibility; the tactile and sensual; a grounding in the earth, the hearth, the self. But perhaps restriction to domestic realism as a microcosm reflecting broader societal landscapes is irresponsible in the current ecological climate, as humanity finds itself entering the Anthropocene and potentially facing down the sixth mass global extinction. In *The Great Derangement* Amitav Ghosh laments the 'smaller shadow' cast by climate change within the landscape of literary fiction: 'fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals; the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or short story to the genre of science fiction' (Ghosh 2017). Modernist interiority may indeed be fascinating – but is it enough when the planet is on fire?

Award-winning science-fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson cuts to the chase: 'the models modern literary fiction has are so depleted, what they're turning to now is our guys in disguise: George Saunders, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Letham ... We're still kissing the arse of the dominant culture as if we are some kind of literature that doesn't really know what it's doing, nonsense because now everything is SF and the literary fiction community is all desperately trying to do SF because we live in a SF world' (2017).

Confirmation bias and genre snobbery go hand in hand, and yet tropes are by no means the exclusive domain of rockets and robots, as a list of amusing book titles by *Writers' HQ* makes clear: *Middle-aged English Professor Inexplicably Attractive to Lithe Young Student* by Winston Douche, *The Lesbian Dies at the End* by MS Cishet, *Dysfunctional Family Bonds over Tragic Event* by RS Wankshaft, *the road is a metaphor for my lack of imagination*, a short and pointless novel by Brian Ego, and – my personal favourite – *Misunderstood White Man by a Lake* by George Mannington (*Writers' HQ* n.d.). Genre snobbery is surely an outdated affectation no longer serving the greater good. In my view, for serious literature to apply itself to the crisis at hand, the economic and cultural scaffolding of publishing and criticism must expand its horizons.

Growing up in the 70s, I saw science fiction as the art form asking the important questions, offering possibilities in easy-to-digest forms: images and words. What happens if a giant meteorite strikes the earth? What if there are too many people, or not enough food, or if someone lets loose an untreatable disease? Science fiction was my playground, my enabler, an access-drug propelling me beyond the limits of earth and earthbound domestic experiences. Speculative fiction functioned as an extension-of-self mechanism, a way of getting more life out of life, of being more than one small person living in unremarkable circumstances. It facilitated access to extra lives, extra experiences: immersion, enhancement and transcendence. Post-apocalypse narratives, such as Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow* and John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*, held a particular fascination – something dangerously attractive beckoned from those burnt and barren Badlands; the crumbling ruins of civilizations; the permanence of bridge and tower scattered into ash and dust; the high romance of a world in ruin: broken roads and broken rules.

I write speculative fiction today as a direct response to childhood questions that did not fade when I reached voting age. I write it because there is no clear line where science ends and the speculative kicks in. What truer expression of art appreciation can there be than to make it yourself? Storytelling is a magic *spelling* infused with raw, unadulterated power. Stories shape the way societies and individuals see the world and what they make of it (both what they make of what we see, and what they make the world to be) – influencing who and what they become. Fiction is alchemy in motion, fashioning the precious from the base, the extraordinary from the commonplace.

The speculative Australian future I imagined for my novel *Lotus Blue* is a harsh, unforgiving landscape, seen through multiple points of view – from the perspective of various characters making a go of things in difficult times. Set in a future war- and climate-ravaged Australia, the consequences of inadequate environmental planning and protection coupled with a lack of political, social and commercial awareness and responsibility regarding rapid technological development form the scaffolding for a tale in which future generations are still endangered by today's lack of ecological foresight. It is a genre novel written with, I intend, a distinctly literary flair: an action adventure complete with killer robots, centuries-old warriors, and other popular genre tropes, but it tackles serious issues of morality, social justice and belonging – all of which are relevant today, alongside rapid advancements in real-world science and technology.

Science fiction has always been about imagining – for better or worse – the consequences of socially, politically, and technologically changing landscapes. This plays out in genre publishing, and publishing more generally, in ways other than simply the content of the stories spec-fic writers produce. It's worth noting that five of the six finalists in the best science-fiction novel category of the 2017 Aurealis Awards – awards established to recognise the achievements of Australian science fiction, fantasy, and horror writers (and which both co-authors have been shortlisted for) – were published as literary rather than genre novels. This is evidence that 'literary' writers are turning to speculative fiction as an apt form to interrogate what it means to be human, to be humane, and, increasingly, posthuman – the sorts of questions handled by theologians before the Enlightenment, and by 'big L' literature after. And it is evidence that genre gatekeepers are also reading, and rating, these difficult-to-categorise works (marketed as 'big L') that – according to Le Guin's 'characteristic gesture' of the genre – 'see the Deep', as Gilgamesh did, before returning with a new perspective from which to (re)see their own world. (Le Guin, 2016).

The way the future is anticipated (in literature, and publishing too) is intrinsic to the fabric of cultures – and the storytelling that emerges from them. These visions empower individuals to connect with others and give context and meaning to their lives. Speculative fiction has always believed in the end of the world, both existentially and literally: its authors use imagination to situate readers in different spaces, places and times; they are often required to craft and shape entire new worlds, complete with cultures and economic systems, in order to render future or alternative cultural projections engaging and believable. Such a skillset is invaluable as humanity comes to the point where new approaches to life on a rapidly warming earth are required. The coming decades will see problems of increasing complexity: permanent political and social instability, dangerous weather, food and water insecurity, and ever-more displaced persons whether as a result of war or weather. As Atwood cautions, we are living through a time of 'everything change' (Atwood 2015).

Adulthood is generally accompanied by an expectation to put away 'childish things', but more and more of what once might have been labelled as science fiction, and therefore childish by default, is now commonplace reality: Elon Musk has launched his red Tesla Roadster into orbit (ABC News 2018); Breakthrough Initiatives, led by Russian tycoon Yuri Milner and, until his death, physicist Stephen Hawking, searches for intelligent extra-terrestrial life and plans to follow this by transmitting messages into space (Breakthrough Initiatives n.d.); and overpopulation is back on the agenda, with some estimates claiming the global population will hit 9.8 billion by 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs n.d.).

*Colossus: The Forbin Project*, a 1970 film about two massive defence supercomputers who join forces and hold humanity to nuclear ransom, doesn't seem so farfetched given current advances in artificial intelligence and deep learning (1970). The film *Rollerball* predicted an America run by leviathan capitalist corporations – much like today's global positioning of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Netflix and Google (1975). Geeks have inherited the earth, and technological advancement outpaces governments' abilities to keep up, let alone regulate. Reality has all but overtaken science fiction as the more fantastic/al story: the accelerated pace of change has resulted in uncertain outcomes, and the impact of technology grows exponentially on an ever-increasing number of fronts. Our current globalised world is flooded with serious concerns: from weaponised pathogens to synthetic biology, autonomous combat weaponry, computer hacking, religious fundamentalism, and the jobless future to the widening gap between rich and poor – all topics that have been dealt with regularly, and in detail, by science-fiction authors for decades.

## Conclusion

In our view, inward-focusing mimetic fiction simply no longer seems to be the best literary form to guide societies through these rapid-fire, world-altering changes – if, indeed, it ever was. Unencumbered by the requisite conservatism of science and journalism, science fiction is empowered to illustrate both the successes and failures of collective cultural imagination, revealing how the present and the future are interconnected via narratives of social values and desires. Our communities no longer have the luxury of looking inward when we live in a post-modern world into which we're pumping climate-warming carbon dioxide ten times faster than at any other time in the past sixty-six million years.

There is plenty of scope for non-didactic narratives prioritising climate consciousness – stressing the social as much as the technical and scientific aspects of climate change. There is plenty of need to encourage long-term thinking about the power and potential of sustainable behaviours: what form they might take, how they might play out. There is a need, too, for narratives that imagine how we might realign our value systems and adapt to a changing world as ice melts and seas rise – or, indeed, change that world. Stories are demanded that appeal to social ethics, question established hierarchies, explore changes that might be implemented throughout ordinary, individual lives, and – ultimately – address our responsibility for fashioning an ecologically sustainable future.

Anthropocene fiction's greatest power may lie in the fact that authors with designated 'big L' literary pedigrees – such as Margaret Atwood, Colson Whitehead, Cormac McCarthy, Kazuo Ishiguro, James Bradley and Maggie Gee, as well as the others included on Sterling's list – are writing it, enabling stories that might have once been dismissed as science fiction to find receptive audiences. Anthropocene fiction may have emerged from the ecocatastrophe science fiction of earlier decades, but it now stands on its own as the literature most clearly concerned with our planet in transformation. It has the power to give climate change a human focus, translating complex and evolving scientific concepts into tales that reimagine human interactions (with others, themselves, and the wider world). Ultimately, as co-authors of this essay, we are interested in what we see as the responsibilities of long-form writers – and the possibilities of non-realist writing – to answer the profound challenge of understanding and responding to the Anthropocene.

Authors such as Nick Admussen advocate breaking with existing traditions of art and media, moving away from stories about individuals who profit from narratives of progress, and abandoning sentimental ideas about the natural world (2016). He calls for a radical 'spec-fic' revolution, which we believe may show signs of emerging, including among our local small press network. Ecology itself calls for a reform of capitalism, as storytelling calls for the expansion of boundaries and exploration into new frontiers: the pulling down of fences, the retiring of old ideas and invigoration of fresh, new perspectives. There is no science-fiction anymore, just as there is no valid dominant culture. The future is now, and all fiction is – and must be, as it has always been – speculative.

## Endnotes

1. A 2017 ARC Linkage grant, 'Genre Worlds: Australian Genre Publishing in the Twenty-First Century', seems to signal growing academic interest in an area of publishing that has long been a mainstay for the trade.
2. The idea of a reading practice that primarily emphasises an emotional connection with literary works has been discussed by Beth Driscoll as a 'new literary middlebrow' market

(2014). Certainly in the authors' professional experience, many booksellers and publishers, marketers and festival organisers recognise popular literary fiction as working in this way.

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