

The first sf magazine I ever bought was the November 1970 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. From front to back, it contained stories by Keith Roberts, Robert Sheckley, Christopher Anvil, Charles E. Fritch, Richard A. Lupoff, Prosper Merimee (from 1837, translated by Francis B. Shaffer), and one Sonya Dorman.

Her novelette “Alpha Bets” was the issue’s cover story (artwork by Jack Gaughan) and also earned her a spot on the back cover. At that time, *F&SF*’s back covers occasionally featured a small photo and bio blurb of an author. The photo of Dorman--a head shot by the legendary Jay Kay Klein--shows a woman of early middle age, with short dark hair and horn-rimmed glasses, looking somewhere off to the photographer’s left and smiling broadly. As I look at that picture now, I have a strong sense of her smiling not at something she’s seeing, but at something she’s

thinking.

I probably recognized her name. I had already latched onto my older brother’s book club edition of *Dangerous Visions* (1967, hereinafter *DV*) and read her story therein, “Go, Go, Said the Bird,” as I would later read her work in other original anthologies such as Damon Knight’s *Orbit* and Samuel R. Delany and Marilyn Hacker’s *Quark*. When I first came to sf, Dorman’s was one of those names that was familiarly there, not sticking out, just part of the scene: oh, yeah, her. She’s good. Wonder why she doesn’t publish more?

And then around 1980 she stopped publishing fiction altogether, and in 2005 she died, and the SFWA obituary mentioned her most famous story, “When I Was Miss Dow,” and I realized, to my dismay, that I had never read it. But it



“sometimes a short page/is better than a volume”:

*The Science Fiction Stories of Sonya Dorman*

F. Brett Cox

was right there on my bookshelves in *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* (1993), so I read it. The timing is important: although Dorman’s name held fond associations with my years as a teenage sf fan, I came to this particular story as an adult, my critical judgment presumably unimpeded by nostalgia. I was deeply impressed, so much so that I wrote an appreciation of the story for the “ED SF Project,” a series of posts about well-known sf stories that Ellen Datlow reprinted during her tenure as the editor of the online magazine *Sci Fiction*. (This article includes material from that earlier appreciation.)

I was convinced there was more to be done with

Dorman's fiction, but other projects occupied me, and I never followed up. But I also never completely abandoned the thought of returning to Dorman, someday. So when William asked me to write something for the issue of *Portable Storage* now before you, I thought: now's the time to revisit—in some cases, visit for the first time—the sf stories of Sonya Dorman.

Much of the limited biographical information about Dorman may be found in the author note accompanying the recent reprint of “When I Was Miss Dow” in Lisa Yaszek's anthology *The Future Is Female!* (2018, hereinafter *TFIF*) and Harlan Ellison's introduction to her story in *DV*. She was born Sonya Gloria Hess in New York City in 1924 but grew up on a farm in western Massachusetts, raised by foster parents after her mother's death during Sonya's infancy. With no money for college, she read widely while working a variety of jobs that any aspiring writer would be proud of—“stablehand, maid, fish canner, riding instructor, tuna boat cook,” according to *TFIF*, to which the author adds, in the *DV* introduction, receptionist and flamenco dancer. She married engineer Jack Dorman in 1950; the couple lived in New York state and Connecticut, where they raised and showed Akita dogs. A daughter, Sherri, was born in 1959.

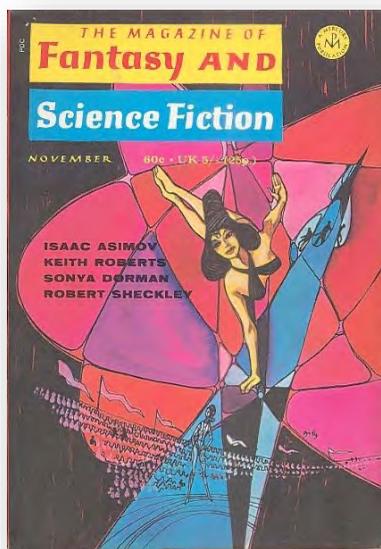
Dorman published fiction and poetry in both sf and mainstream magazines (the latter including such venerable titles as *Cosmopolitan* and *The Saturday Evening Post*) and anthologies. Although she published several collections of poetry from the 1970s into the 1990s, there was only one published book of fiction, *Planet Patrol* (1978), a YA novel fix-up of three *F&SF* novelettes (including the above-mentioned “Alpha Bets”). *Onyx*, which the *TFIF* introduction labels an “experimental novel,” was never published, and the 23 stories that appeared steadily

in sf magazines from 1963 to 1980 have never been collected. Her poem “Corruption of Metals,” published in the 1977 sf anthology *2076: The American Tricentennial*, won the Rhysling Award for Best Short Poem; “When I Was Miss Dow” was shortlist for a retrospective Tiptree Award in 1996. After divorcing Jack Dorman in 1986, she moved to Taos, New Mexico, where she lived until her death in 2005 at the age of eighty.

Certainly relative to most of her peers in the sf community, Dorman's fiction bibliography is brief. But it's always a mistake to confuse quantity with quality, and her comment in the

*DV* introduction is revealing: “I raise and show Akitas...in between writing poems and stories.” No clearer testimony to the writer of serious intent than to refer what was presumably her main source of income as an interstitial activity. And the stories themselves display not only serious intent, but a variety of intents. *TFIF* identifies her as “particularly associated with science fiction's “New Wave” of edgy, experimental writing”—a reasonable association for a writer whose work appeared not only in *DV* but also Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds*, Damon Knight's *Orbit* (three times), and Samuel R. Delany and Marilyn Hacker's *Quark*. But she also appeared in original anthologies edited by Anne McCaffery and Roger Elwood, and, before she was done, twice in *Analog*. She did not seem to be writing “new wave” stories or *Analog* stories as much as she was writing Sonya Dorman stories.

And what is a Sonya Dorman story? It is a story with a high level of craft, a narrative voice that can be at once conversationally digressive and laser-focused, and, almost always, a clear and unsentimental awareness of

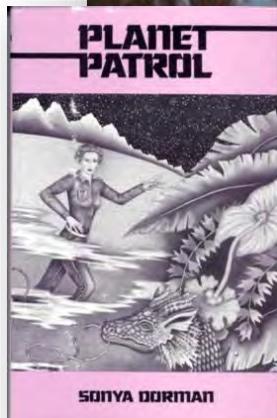
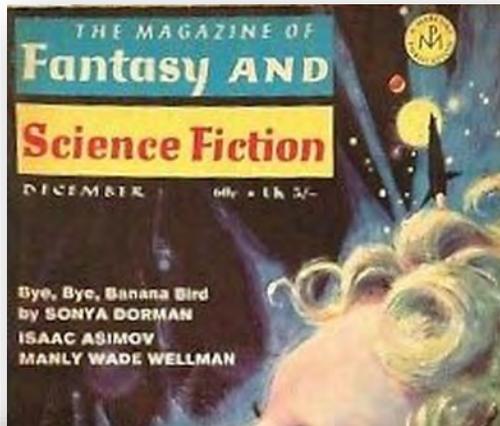


the realities of women's lives, even as it presents these realities in terms of the fantastic.

Many of her stories focus on male vs. female power and in particular the bonds, and strains, between mothers and daughters. In "The Putnam Tradition" (1963), the issue of power is literal as Simone, the latest of "an unbroken succession of matriarchs" with supernatural talents who have lived in the Putnam family home for generations, uses her own talents for domestic labor while her husband (offstage for the entire story) brings to their home his deep understanding of mechanical and electrical devices—things as opposed to traditions. Simone is challenged by both her spectral grandmother, who sees her as weak, and her four-year-old daughter Nina, whose own emerging talents promise equal control of both the traditional power of her mother and the material powers of her father. Simone is at first more scared than hopeful, but by story's end, hope appears to have won.

In contrast, "The Deepest Blue in the World" (1964) is a grim portrait of a future in which teenaged girls are groomed for "the marriage bench," specifically to breed replacements for the men who are killed in an ongoing series of interplanetary wars. When Anna is brought to the Dormitory where the girls are housed, she attempts to rebel

against the system as her mother did, choosing prison over repeated visits to the marriage bench, only to discover that her choices are, in reality, nonexistent. Part of the girls' training is to watch rockets launch from a "space field" visible from their windows, while the "deep blue" of the title refers not only to the sky into which the rockets launch but also to a vase that is Anna's only family legacy. The layering of such Bradburyesque imagery onto a proto-*Handmaid's Tale* scenario keeps the story unsettling almost sixty years later.



Even more striking is Dorman's first *Orbit* story, "Splice of Life" (1966), in which a woman's hospitalization for an eye injury turns into a nightmarish repetition of trauma and pain as part of a larger agenda that is as shadowy as the unnamed medical personnel who treat her. The protagonist, who ineffectually protests against "being treated like a piece of meat on a butcher's block," is named only "Miss D.;" in the story's editorial blurb, Damon Knight notes, with no explanatory detail, that the story is taken from a "real experience" from Dorman's life. After reading the story's opening para-

graph—as good a capture as we have of the fear of the medical doctor's office, especially if you're female—perhaps that's just as well:

"This won't hurt," the doctor said, leaning over her in the white hospital bed from which she could see only a great black vault of ceiling in the center of which burned a furious light. A narrow strip of tape was attached to the nape of her neck; had she been wounded there, too?

What would prove to be Dorman's most enduring story, "When I Was Miss Dow," appeared the

same year as “Splice of Life.” On the surface, the story offers a very recognizable, even routine, sf scenario as a male human scientist doing research on an alien planet falls in love with an alien disguised as a human female. But, like “Splice of Life,” its opening suggests deeper thematic considerations and a leap forward in narrative strategy that remains astonishing:

“Those hungry, mother-haunted people come and find us living in what they like to call crystal palaces, though really we live in glass places, some of them highly ornamented and others plain as paper. They come first as explorers, and perhaps realize we are a race of one sex only, rather amorphous beings of proteide; and we, even baby I, are Protean also, being able to take various shapes at will. One sex, one brain lobe, we lie in more or less glass bridges over the humanoid chasm, eating, recreating, attending races and playing other games like most living creatures.

“Eventually, we’re all dumped into the cell banks and reproduced once more.”

This is pure exposition--the above quotes tells you pretty much everything you need to know about the rest of the story--but moves quickly and exudes energy. The entire story is a brilliant example not only of using an alien point of view but also of an author perfectly matching the resources of her language to the resources of her imagination, as when the alien-as-human starts learning “Terran history”: “When the clown tumbles into the tub, I laugh. Terran history is full of clowns and tubs; at first it seems that’s all there is, but you learn to see beneath the comic costumes.”

The story doesn’t hesitate to be sentimental when as the alien shapeshifters have pet “kootas” that are, for all intents and purposes, dogs (a likely nod to her career as a dog breeder), or to buy into audience expectations when the alien-as-human-female falls in love with the male scientist. But it also doesn’t hesitate to turn away from sentimentality and defy expectations when the alien, well, just gets over it. It’s a

story of its time that has been overtaken by history (happily, it’s no longer easy to imagine an interstellar expedition whose “scientific parties . . . are 90 percent of one sex”), and it’s a story that could have been written last week. If “Splice of Life” is a bridge between the quietly appalled visions of Shirley Jackson and the body horror of Clive Barker, “When I Was Miss Dow,” in its exquisitely energetic language, drill-to-the-bone imagination, and fundamentally subversive view of the alienness of the human, may be the missing link between Alfred Bester and James Tiptree, Jr.

Dorman’s remaining stories of the late 60s and early 70s include work that supports *TFIF*’s placing her within the “new wave” tradition, in particular “Go, Go, said the Bird” (1967), “The Living End” (1970), and “Bitching It” (1971). (“Nest Egg,” published in *New Worlds* in 1970, would presumably fit into such a grouping; unfortunately, I was unable to obtain a copy of it for this article.) In “Go, Go, said the Bird,” a young woman’s run for her life through a post-apocalyptic landscape is interspersed with memories of the tribal existence, including cannibalism and infanticide, that preceded her journey and waits for her at its conclusion. “The Living End” is another story about a woman entering a hospital, this time to give birth, but on an artificially accelerated schedule, and in a place where, it is implied, women are having lots of babies for purposes other than reproduction. “Bitching It” is arguably sf only through the first sentence of the 1971 story’s referring to the 1980s in the past tense; it also foregrounds Dorman’s career with Akita dogs in its energetic scenario of a group of women having sex with one man surrounded by dogs who are likewise occupied, a scenario in which the humans and the dogs are perhaps not all that different. All three stories show Dorman’s ongoing concern with issues of pregnancy and motherhood, and the ongoing risks the world—any world—places on women

who give birth.

But as I noted earlier, Dorman did not confine herself exclusively to the darkly challenging fiction associated with the “new wave.” Her peak publication year, 1970, included “The Living End” and “Nest Egg,” but also “A Mess of Porridge,” in which faculty at an interplanetary university cope with the sudden appearance of a six-year-old interplanetary princess, and “Me-Too,” another account of human-alien interactions from the point of view of the alien. It was also the publication year of “Alpha Bets,” which, along with “Bye, Bye Banana Bird” (1969) and “The Bear Went Over the Mountain” (1973), formed Dorman’s only published novel, *Planet Patrol* (1978). These three stories may appear anomalous within Dorman’s published fiction—her only stories of novelette length, tales of interplanetary adventure in which a cheerful, accessible narrator, Roxy Rimidon, leads the reader through her progress as cadet-in-training and, eventually, agent for the Planet Patrol, as introduced in “Bye, Bye, Banana Bird”:

“Trained troubleshooters, we would go into a central Patrol pool on earth, and then could be called to special duty anywhere, including the colony planets Vogl and Alpha.”

But Roxy’s stories, like so much of Dorman’s other fiction, occur in a world in which the expectations of women and the burdens of motherhood are clearly acknowledged. Female members of the Patrol retire by age 32 to marry, teach at the cadet academy, and, presumably, have children; Roxy initially endures body-shaming because of her weight. Nonetheless, female cadets undergo the same training as males in both the classroom and the field, and, upon graduation, can look forward to the same assignments. Straightforward and unassuming as they are, the *Planet Patrol* stories are as staunchly feminist as anything Dorman ever wrote, and

assume, circa 1970, the talents and capabilities of women to a degree that the world outside fiction would regrettably not assume for a few more decades.

The remaining stories that Dorman published through the 1970s continue to cover a variety of ground, although for the most part they trend more towards the recognizable science fiction tales of some of her earlier work. Her final story for *Orbit*, “Time Bind” (1974), is a somewhat convoluted time-travel story, while her two contributions to *Analog* are, interestingly, sf about creativity. “The Sons of Bingaloo” (1973) is a brief account of a world under “triple moons” where the response to art takes the form of regular computer evaluation and licensing, while “Building Block” (1975) is narrated by an architect-entrepreneur undergoing therapy to overcome a creative drought. (In the grand tradition of reality sooner or later catching up with science fiction, “Building Block” also considers the ethics of designing space habitats for the super-rich.) Like many of her peers, Dorman also put in an appearance in an original anthology edited by the indefatigable Roger Elwood; “Death or Consequences” (1975) tells of a young musician awakened from a cryogenic sleep into the traumatically uncertain world of a hospital satellite. In her final *F&SF* story, “Them and Us and All” (1976), Dorman offers a near-future dystopia in which a middle-class family falls to ruin within a society in which any attempt at self-regulating one’s mental state has been outlawed by a government unnerved “that such a high proportion of the citizens were developing personal control of their lives and destinies that politicians could no longer predict how their constituents would behave.” And it’s perhaps appropriate that Dorman’s final published sf story, “Peek-a-Boom” (1980), is another alien-viewpoint scenario, although this time the alien wants nothing other than to get away from the all-too-human humans holding it under observation.

Of all Dorman’s later stories, one in particular ranks among her best. An indirect return to one

of Dorman's recurrent themes—the mother-daughter dynamic—"Cool Affection" (1974) also provides a sharp take on attitudes towards the Other and the limitations of charity by narrating, briefly and simply, an encounter in a city inhabited by humans and aliens. When the human Mrs. Crandy finds an abandoned child, Agnes, sleeping on a doorstep, her efforts to help are stymied by the fact that Agnes is the offspring of an alien father and human mother; like her father, she is cold-blooded and suffers in warm temperatures. However, Agnes rejects Mrs. Crandy's offers to alter her own home environment. She knows that a gesture, however generous, will not solve the basic problem, but understanding might help: "You see me sleepin' on a step, don't try to warm, okay?" One of Dorman's quietest stories, it's also one of her most effective.

Sonya Dorman published in almost all the major sf magazines of her day, and many of the leading anthologies, alongside many of the field's most renowned authors and works. (Her first published sf story, "Winged Victory" [1963], appeared in the same issue of *F&SF* as Roger Zelazny's "A Rose for Ecclesiastes"; "The Living End" shared *Orbit 7*'s table of contents with R.A. Lafferty's "Continued on Next Rock" and Gene Wolfe's "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories.") The best of her stories—"The Deepest Blue in the World," "Splice of Life," "Go, Go, said the Bird," "Cool Affection," and, of course, "When I Was Miss Dow"—are very good indeed, and all of them, without exception, are skillful and interesting tales. Why she wasn't more honored in her time, and has not as yet received major posthumous attention, is a question to which I have no answer. Part of it may be as simple as the fact that, in a field that values the prolific, she simply didn't write that much, and what she did write, "When I Was Miss Dow" excepted, is not readily available to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader. Part of it may be that, like most other forms of literature, sf has always privileged the novel over the short story, and Dorman's one novel was a YA fixup in an era

when writing for that audience was not as appreciated as it is today.

But per the quote in the title of this article—a line from Dorman's poem "Vanishing Point" (*Quark/3*, 1971)—sometimes a short page really is better than a volume. Maybe that's part of what that woman in the picture on the back cover of my first sf magazine was thinking. Dorman's sf stories would fit comfortably between the covers of one book. Here's hoping that happens someday.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Lisa Yaszek, Regents Professor of Science Fiction Studies at Georgia Tech, and Vaughne Hansen, of the Virginia Kidd Literary Agency, for information and support regarding Dorman's unpublished work.

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