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Intersections of Age and Gender

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The background of the cover is a light yellow-green gradient. It is decorated with several stylized, light green leaf motifs that appear to be floating or falling from the top left towards the bottom right. These motifs are scattered across the entire cover, with some appearing more prominently than others.

WOMEN IN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

Volume 1 and 2

Robin Anne Reid

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Intersections of Age and Gender

LAURA QUILTER AND LIZ HENRY

SCIENCE fiction and fantasy (SF/F), at its best, pushes the boundaries of literary exploration of human experience. Age and **gender** diversity in social science fiction, the genre of science fiction (SF) that focuses more on exploration of social structures than on technology, opens many questions of identity, politics, and investigation of cultural issues around aging bodies, family roles, and the maturation process.

REPRESENTATIONS AND CHARACTERIZATIONS

A character's age holds meaning, creating or playing into common expectations of age-related roles. In SF, protagonists are most often adult men: they are adventurers, scientists, or soldiers focused on action, without direct responsibility for anyone else's care. Female characters are particularly marked with respect to their age, so age diversity and the presence of complex social and family ties are important in assessing women in SF/F.

Power

Even a brief glance at the ages of male and female characters suffices to demonstrate the highly gendered social treatment in relation to maturity and age. A woman character's age is always notable, in contrast to male protagonists, whose age is not as marked. Female protagonists are most often young, their youth signifying sexual availability and reproductive potential, and even women in their thirties may be read as "older" women by other characters, authors, and readers alike. Youthful female and unmarked-age male characters, therefore, define a storytelling standard of romantic pairings of young women and older men.

This common age and gender pairing for romances in science fiction books and movies is part of a broader characterization of women as

subordinate in age or relationship to male characters. Because power comes with age, the token plucky girl or scientist's daughter is "naturally" junior to the older male characters. Authors recapitulate that dynamic in numerous ways: Gene Wolfe's *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987), for instance, transforms the strong, professional Gunnie into the much younger Burgundofara, decreasing her competence while enhancing her innocence, sexual availability, and need of (male) **education** and protection.

The counterpart to the plucky young girl is the classic portrayal of the powerful older woman as villainess: the wicked stepmother or Baba Yaga, a destructive or menacing creature who is frequently obsessed with youth or beauty, as in "Snow White" and *Catwoman* (2004). Numerous works revisit these stereotypes or their underlying mythic archetypes, for example, the humanistic fairy godmothers in **Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's** Godmothers series, the wicked witch in Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* (1996), and the grandmotherly priestess in **Nalo Hopkinson's** *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998). Other works directly engage **feminist spirituality** and mythic themes, such as the "triple goddess" motif of maiden, mother, and crone, as in **Marion Zimmer Bradley's** *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980), and Marie Jakober's *The Black Chalice* (1999) and *High Kamilan* (1993). Such stories reflect a significant trend in fantastic literature that imagines an egalitarian society that values mature and powerful women in conflict with emergent patriarchy. This conflict also appears in works such as **Theodore Roszak's** *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* (1995), Kim Chernin's *The Flame Bearers* (1986), and Elizabeth Hand's *Waking the Moon* (1995), in which mature priestesses sustain a "hidden history."

Older women's proverbial outspokenness, vilified when they are framed negatively as harri-dans, scolds, shrews, or nags, may also, in subversive feminist reclamations, be reframed positively as bluntness, fearlessness, and a no-nonsense ability to articulate problems. In **Suzette Haden Elgin's** Ozark series, older women aspire to become Grannies who operate in political roles outside the patriarchal hierarchy, their status signified by dress, age, and speech. While the role of young women is to act with energy and resolution, that of older women is to speak unpalatable truths and cut across established patterns. The better the Grannies fit the grumpy-old-woman stereotype, the more powerful and effective they are. "Bossy" older women are articulate revolutionaries in the crone-led rebellions of Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974) and Anna Livia's *Bulldozer Rising* (1988) and the middle-aged rebel leaders of **Ursula K. Le Guin's** "The Day before the Revolution" (1974), Myrna Elana's "Hourglass City" (1997), and Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993).

Another response engages the postmenopausal power of reproduction, such as the Bene Gesserit's breeding program in Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1963) or **Isaac Asimov's** Dr. Susan Calvin, who works on robot reproduction throughout her life. Works that address the terrains of "feminine" and

“masculine” power explicitly include **Lois McMaster Bujold’s** *Cetaganda* (1995), whose protagonist and readers come to understand that the Haut ladies’ breeding program is the ultimate power in Haut society, while the “masculine” military power is merely a tool used by the ladies. Similarly, the leaders in **Sheri S. Tepper’s** *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1988) control reproduction, manipulating the apparent power of the military. Breeding programs are also at the core of Liz Williams’s *Banner of Souls* (2005), and again, military power is ultimately subordinate to the reproductive program.

Other works have tried to step outside this dichotomy altogether, depicting powerful older women who are not necessarily evil, “scheming,” or focused on reproduction. Characters such as Gran’mä Ben in Jeff Smith’s graphic series *Bone*, Ofelia in **Elizabeth Moon’s** *Remnant Population* (1997), Granny Weatherwax in **Terry Pratchett’s** Discworld series, and *Les Triplettes de Belleville* (2003) attest to storytelling possibilities beyond the dichotomy. Writers have explored the potential for physical power in older and middle-aged female warriors: **Elizabeth Lynn’s** *Northern Girl* (Paxe), S. M. Stirling’s Nan-tucket series (Coast Guard captain Marian Alston), and **Mercedes Lackey’s** Vanyel trilogy (Aunt Savil). Other writers have put older women in the heroic quest role, as in **Eleanor Arnason’s** *Daughter of the Bear King* (1987) and **Nancy Kress’s** *The Prince of Morning Bells* (1981), whose protagonist’s quest is interrupted by marriage. Carol Emshwiller explored, tongue in cheek, the labors and heroism of an elderly female superhero in “Grandma” (2002).

Some writers have directly shown women’s struggles for power in sexist societies, whether as the power behind the throne in **Mary Doria Russell’s** *Children of God* (1998) or the explicit feminist struggles and implicit sexism faced by the characters in L. Timmel Duchamp’s Marq’ssan series. Other stories have simply taken a humanistic approach to depicting feminine leadership in egalitarian societies, such as the characters of Marti Hok in Lynn’s *Northern Girl* (1980), who typifies a nongendered political brinksmanship, and Grum in **Vonda N. McIntyre’s** *Dreamsnake* (1978), who is a respected tribal leader and grandmother.

Hollywood’s efforts in this direction have led to characters such as Captain Janeway on **Star Trek: Voyager** (1995) and President McDonnell on **Battlestar Galactica** (2004), women who are relatively youthful and attractive. Such representations break down the stereotype of older women as unattractive, villainous, or obsessed with beauty, but do little to counter the expectation that female characters must be presented as sexually attractive or to shift the norm from the default assumption that whiteness is the status quo in television.

Sexuality

Typically depicted as the domain of the nubile young, sexuality in older people, particularly older women, may be inscribed as repulsive, decadent, or

corrupt. Many authors have resisted this vision of older women's sexuality, explicitly engaging older women in healthy sexuality or romance: Madeleine Robins's *The Stone War* (1999), Molly Gloss's *The Dazzle of Day* (1997), Laurie Marks's *The Watcher's Mask* (1992) and Elemental Logic series, Lynn's *Northern Girl*, Donna McMahon's *Dance of Knives* (2001), and Stirling's Nantucket series. Presaging some of this exploration, Sylvia Townsend Warner's spinster "of a certain age" in *Lolly Willowses* (1925) dismays and disrupts familial and social expectations by finding romance and sexuality. Among the classic SF writers, **Robert A. Heinlein** notably included sexually enthusiastic middle-aged women in later novels such as *The Number of the Beast* (1980).

A number of stories center on the concerns raised by such late-in-life romances. For instance, in Lois McMaster Bujold's *Paladin of Souls* (2003), the Dowager Empress Ista escapes her "madwoman in the attic" role by going on pilgrimage. While she is concerned for her adult children, she focuses primarily on her search for love, equal partnership, and self-determination. Le Guin's fourth Earthsea novel, *Tehanu* (1990), picks up the story of Tenar, now middle-aged after experiencing the life afforded to young women in her society: marriage, childrearing, drudgery, and submission. In *Tehanu*, Tenar finds love with Ged, while experiencing the gap between her own and society's expectations for middle-aged women. **Geoff Ryman's** Chung Mae in *Air* (2004) faces similar issues when ending her marriage and taking new lovers.

Rather than reclaiming sexuality for postmenopausal women, some writers have posited sexuality as confusing or even dangerous to women. In Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984), for instance, only postmenopausal women are considered trustworthy revolutionaries; their real work begins when they move to Barren House and their loyalties are no longer troubled by sexuality. Elgin's Ozark Grannies are powerful in part because they are outside of the sexual market system. In Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988), young women are prone to infatuations with the glamorized male warriors and are consequently excluded from power and knowledge, their sexuality rendering them complicit in their oppression both by their male lovers and the secret matriarchy. Tepper's older female protagonist in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* (1996) considers saving the world by eliminating sexual desire altogether. In **Diana Wynne Jones's** *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986), the young female protagonist, Sophie, is magically transformed into an elderly woman, who is expected to act independently rather than wait for rescue or marriage. She has both the authority of life experience and the invisibility of an elderly laborer.

The Child

Adult-oriented SF/F rarely features children as protagonists, instead treating them as secondary characters with thematic or plot functions. Such child characters may carry many related meanings: innocence, wildness, uncontrollable energy, unpredictability, chaos. Children can signify monstrosity or

act as harbingers of the future. Writers intensify characterizations and plots by emphasizing children's vulnerability. The presence of children in a story can also intensify **horror** and evil, and authors play on both gender and racist stereotypes to contrast presumed innocence with hidden monstrosity. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) used this contrast to create a sense of psychological horror, a device also used in films such as *The Bad Seed* (1956) and TV episodes of *The Twilight Zone* ("It's a Good Life," 1961), *Angel* (the Senior Partners' first representative), and *The X-Files* ("Eve," "The Calusari," "Chinga," 1993–98). Myths of changelings and bewitching youths prefigure these monstrous innocents and often add sexual tension to their relations with adults.

The discomfiting mingling of adult sexuality in a child's body has often been used to great effect, such as the eternal child in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) and the child **vampires** in **Anne Rice's** *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and **Octavia Butler's** *Fledging* (2005), all of whom combine decades of life in a child's body with an adult's mature interests. Numerous writers have explored adult sexual exploitation of young people: Connie Willis's "All My Darling Daughters" (1985), **Joan Vinge's** *Psion* (1982), and Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993).

Portrayals of emergent adolescent sexuality may be highly gendered, hinging or focusing on the future sex-object status of female children; classically, a Gigi-like spunky girl grows up and finds romance, as in Heinlein's *Podkayne of Mars* (1962) or Alexei Panshin's *Rite of Passage* (1968). Girl characters may also be active sexual agents, assertive and in control of their own sexuality, but not overwhelmed or depicted primarily as sexual, as in **Diane Duane's** *Young Wizards* series, Justine Larbalestier's *Magic or Madness* series, and Y.T. in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992).

The social structures that youths create form an important aspect of many works about young people, playing out visions of children as the "natural" or primitive uncivilized version of humans. Gender may play a role in these stories, as well. In some instances, the violence into which boys' communities descend may be seen as a commentary on boys' inclination toward brutality when they lack the civilizing influence of women. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), like Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985), purports to show the cruel hierarchies that ungoverned boys may establish by violence. Other authors, however, show children working together to build alliances and protect the vulnerable or weak members, as in Tamora Pierce's *Circle of Magic* and *Protector of the Small* series.

Children, teens, and young adults are often harbingers of the future, as in Wilmar Shiras's *Children of the Atom* (1953), **Theodore Sturgeon's** *More Than Human* (1952), and the adolescent mutants of *The X-Men* (1963–present). Sydney Van Scyoc writes about mutant children with wild superpowers in the *Daughters of the Sun* trilogy, where puberty triggers metamorphosis. Adult relationships with these children thematically parallel anxieties about the

future and hybrid identity, as in Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Andrea Hairston’s *Mindscape* (2006), and **Joan Slonczewski**’s *Elysian* novels, which feature **genetically engineered** and hybrid children. In Van Scyoc’s *Starmother* (1984) mutant children frighten adults, and the adults in Stephanie Smith’s *Other Nature* (1995) are similarly concerned about their mysterious, seal-like children.

Preteen girls in particular, on the cusp of puberty, may discover or manifest unusual powers or abilities, as in the tradition of young girl witches and poltergeists. In adult-targeted works, these explorations may represent the maturation process, as in Richard Lupoff’s *Lisa Kane* (1976) and *Ginger Snaps* (2000), which liken the werewolf metamorphosis to puberty. **Zenna Henderson**’s *People* stories often relate the experience of the alien “Other” to the alienation experienced by children.

Child Protagonists

By contrast with works targeted to adults, which largely treat children as plot or thematic devices, works that are written for youths foreground children and youth perspectives. In such young adult (YA) works, children are the protagonists, and the stories are their journeys. Wilderness adventures are not parables of humanity’s degeneration, but stories of empowerment or rebellion. Cruel children’s hierarchies, when explored from the youth perspective, present universal themes of alienation, vulnerability, and disempowerment, as in **Andre Norton**’s underclass of alienated and disempowered younger characters. Unusual powers that manifest during adolescence, rather than signifying the frightening future, permit youthful protagonists to build their own identities, as in Willo Davis Roberts’s *The Girl with the Silver Eyes* (1980), Lackey’s *Valdemaran* heralds-in-training, “Escape to Witch Mountain” (1975), Nnedima Okerafor-Mbachu’s *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005), and *The X-Men*.

Outside of YA, works with ensemble casts often include youths. Here, too, gender plays a role: the boy team members of *Star Trek* are clichés, but works such as *The X-Men* and **Joss Whedon**’s ***Firefly*** have successfully integrated empowered young women into ensemble casts. Other works, such as Whedon’s ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer***, actually focus on those characters.

AGING AND MORTALITY

While the age of a character can be a signifier or proxy for personal characteristics, the processes of aging and mortality also offer authors the opportunity to explore the richness of human social relations and fundamental concerns about human identity. In literature, art, and myth or religion, one of the central human responses to aging has been fear of death and dying. Intergenerational relations and human identity are fundamentally shaped by how societies choose to respond to that central human response: Does a

society avoid or integrate death and aging? Mistreat or venerate the elderly? Nurture or exploit the young? The choices an author makes in establishing its fictional society, whether articulated in terms of aging and mortality or not, fundamentally shape the characterizations, plots, and significance of any story.

The role of aging in individuals' lives is most apparent in stories that follow single characters over the course of a lifetime. **Naomi Mitchison's** *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), for instance, paints a complicated portrait of an explorer and alien communications expert across her lifetime. Rebecca Ore's *Outlaw School* (2000) similarly follows a woman through her life, from youth to renegade to folk hero. Geoff Ryman turned this approach on its head in *The Child Garden* (1989), giving readers the disjunctive experience of long life that is long only relative to its characters. Nancy Springer's *Larque on the Wing* (1993) explores in depth what it means for someone to live, consciously, in different ages and genders. Larque's midlife crisis generates versions of herself—a 10-year-old girl and a young adult gay man—who have freedoms and talents not available to her as a wife and mother. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) similarly took advantage of time and alternate personas to explore life.

The significance of age is established in part by cultural associations, such as “old equals wise”; “young equals sexual”; and “female equals nurturing.” Many writers use science fictional devices to interrogate these associations, juxtaposing maturity and youth to permit characters to experience life as the Other. Time-travel stories, such as *Back to the Future* (1985), David Gerrold's *The Man Who Folded Himself* (1973), and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), permit characters to observe maturation as outsiders, reflecting on younger versions of themselves or others with their own knowledge and experience. Body-swapping stories, such as Mary Rodgers's *Freaky Friday* (1972), and sudden alterations in age, such as in the movies *Big* (1988) and *13 Going on 30* (2004), expose the absurdities of age-appropriate social conventions. They also offer the opportunity for characters to reflect on themselves, as teenager Oz observes, when commenting on enchanted adults in the *Buffy* episode “Band Candy” (1998): “They're teenagers. It's a sobering mirror to look into, huh?”

The negative value placed on aging has led many authors to speculate that, given the choice, most people would present a relatively youthful appearance. John Varley's *Eight Worlds* universe includes body-manipulation technology that permits characters to choose their age and gender—such as the youths in “Picnic on Nearside” (1974), who choose their gender and are surprised by elderly appearance, and the protagonist of *The Golden Globe* (1998), who chooses to extend his “childhood” to continue his hit children's TV show. Such possibilities may mark those who decide to “age naturally” as social renegades or may signify distasteful eccentricity—as demonstrated by

the protagonists' responses to such characters in Samuel Delany's *Triton* (1976) and Suzette Haden Elgin's *Star-Anchored, Star-Angered* (1976).

Vanity

Most stages of life are gendered in patriarchal societies that value women according to their youth, sexuality, and fertility. SF has treated both the social reality and the sexist stereotype of women determined to remain youthful at all costs, as in the mid-twentieth century films that Vivian Sobchack studied: *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958), *The Wasp Woman* (1959), and *The Leech Woman* (1960). In these and other works, women's efforts to avoid the consequences of aging in a patriarchy are often framed as mere frivolous vanity. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) similarly linked the vain pursuit of eternal youth to **queer** male sexuality. Confronting the vanity stereotype directly, Jacqueline Carey's female sorceress in *Banewrecker* (2004) and *God-slayer* (2005) seeks power from an obsessive fear of death, but with dignity and strength; her fear is not, after all, unreasonable.

Immortality

A large body of literature and religious mythos has explored themes of immortality, longevity, and the quest to avoid death and aging, from roots as far back as Gilgamesh's quest for immortality, through **Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley** (*Frankenstein*, 1819; *The Mortal Immortal*, 1833), to the modern fascination with vampires, nanotechnology, and **cloning**. SF authors have examined numerous forms of immortality, from immortal familial and clonal lineages to biological and machine hybridization. Many such tales cast immortality as fool's gold, tricking people into trading the presumed benefits of short, fertile, and relationship-rich lives for an immortality that leads to sterility, corruption, loneliness, or loss of humanity. Feminist scholar Robin Roberts describes this as a masculine approach to immortality, contrasting feminist approaches that posit immortality as nurturing, rich, experiential, and laden with potential.

Human relationships, and the risks posed by aging to relations with peers and loved ones, are a classic theme explored in immortality stories. Rip Van Winkle, **fairy tales**, time travel, and relativity all permit the writer to frame a world whose characters are estranged from their society—the same dislocation that older people may feel in the face of social change. The soldiers of Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1975) face isolation and social change from the relativistic effects of faster-than-light space travel.

These concerns also arise in the numerous stories that inscribe alien immortals, long-lived races, and eternal objects as cold, inscrutable, and beyond human morality. Long-lived wizards, elves, and magicians often hold a detached, long-term view of human history. Human concerns and morality

may be abandoned or irrelevant to immortals, as shown by examples such as the amoral Q in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; the “cold” enchanted magical objects of Michael Moorcock’s Elric Saga and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Sharra’s Exile* (1981); and the enchanted human/sword “Need” of Mercedes Lackey’s Vows of Honor series. In Larry Niven’s *Protector* (1973), humans who encounter a particular catalyst turn into alien Pak protectors, cold manipulators fanatically driven to protect their breeding-age relatives. Such stories frame mortality and aging as the sine qua non of human existence; those who “escape” death abandon their own humanity.

This choice contrasts with the vision of a feminist immortality that Roberts sees some female SF writers proposing: this immortality offers opportunities to build, construct, and learn. In Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed* (1980), for instance, two immortals, a female and a male, separately attempt to foster immortal families, but Anyawu’s identification with her mutable body leads to self-awareness, empathy, altruism, and community; Doro, the male immortal, degenerating into corruption and despair, must learn not to destroy possibilities for love. Immortal female nurturance can also be seen in Anne Rice’s *Queen of the Damned* (1988) and Steven Barnes’s *Blood Brothers* (1996). **James Tiptree Jr.’s** *Up the Walls of the World* (1978) and Joan Slonczewski’s *The Children Star* (1998) also contrast the potential for long, productive lives with sterility or jadedness. Other stories have explored the family connections offered by immortal clonal lineages, as in **Suzy McKee Charnas’s** *Motherlines* (1978) and **David Brin’s** *Glory Season* (1993); clones are closer than siblings and may even offer the opportunity to learn from clone siblings’ errors, as in Tiptree’s “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?” (1976), Joan Vinge’s *The Snow Queen* (1980), and **C. J. Cherryh’s** *Cyteen* (1988).

Biological and other technologies also offer the possibility of hybridizing, raising issues of parasitism and absorption that are often treated in gendered fashions. Human/machine hybrids, or cyborgs, transform the body with mechanical, nano-, or digital technology. As with reproduction and cloning, thematic questions arise of whether machine replacement offers “more” of new kinds of life or “less” of humanity. **C. L. Moore’s** classic story “No Woman Born” (1944) makes this contrast explicit: a woman’s brain and intelligence are moved into a robot body, arousing her lover’s fears that she will become less human; she insists she is still human, and indeed, rejects immortality in order to retain her humanity. Stephanie Smith’s “Blue Heart” (1983) expands on this theme: a female starship guide transfers her dying male lover into a robot body, and years later in her old age, she, too, transitions to an artificial **cyberbody**, to maintain both love and career forever. Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) and M. John Harrison’s *Light* (2002) further extend this theme. The Borg Queen in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) and *Star Trek: Voyager* (1999–2001) offers the nightmare version of machine replacement: ultimate loss of personality and humanity in the service of a hollow immortality.

INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

Social Conflict

Oppositions of old and young, mortal and immortal, wealthy and poor, establish fundamental social conflicts. The potential for intergenerational conflict was explored quite explicitly in the 1960s and 1970s, reflecting social anxiety around the “generation gap.” Works such as William Nolan and George Clayton Johnson’s *Logan’s Run* (1967) clearly articulate this anxiety, depicting a society that kills everyone over age twenty-one (thirty in the 1976 movie version). Feminist writers **Marge Piercy** (*Dance the Eagle to Sleep*, 1970) and Suzy McKee Charnas (*Walk to the End of the World*, 1974) present the same social conflict in terms of elderly monopolizations of power. In these works, youth revolts show ancient themes of parasitism as a metaphor for class and access to resources, reflecting the disempowered status of the young and poor relative to the rich and elderly.

Unequal access to immortality is the ultimate social inequity, and realistic accounts of widespread social disruption from such inequities have been considered in Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars trilogy, Elizabeth Moon’s *Winning Colors* (1995), Larry Niven’s Known Universe series (organlegging and booster-spice), and Karen Traviss’s *Crossing the Line* (2004). In **Kate Wilhelm**’s *Welcome, Chaos* (1983), a complex middle-aged female protagonist plays a role in the release of a deadly disease that makes its survivors immortal.

Intergenerational conflicts show up as a form of parasitism in numerous stories, often linked to social conflicts over resources. In science fiction, clonal parasites or organ harvesting are common, as in *The Island* (2005) or Lois McMaster Bujold’s *Mirror Dance* (1994), in which bioscientist cartels raise clones for replacement parts for the wealthy elderly. Fantasy and horror, by contrast, look to magic or vampirism, with elders “eating their young,” as in Steven Barnes’s *Blood Brothers*, *The Leech Woman*, Justine Larbalestier’s *Magic or Madness* series, and the *Buffy* episode “Witch” (1997). Vampires operate as a classic metaphor for parasitism, linking aristocratic exploitations directly with aging and mortality in stories and myths from Countess Bathory to Anne Rice to **Chelsea Quinn Yarbro**.

Anxiety in the United States over mistreatment of and disrespect for the elderly has persisted for decades, and numerous works critique our segregation and isolation of the elderly. Rudy Rucker satirized such segregation in his novels *Software* (1982) and *Wetware* (1988), in which the elderly have taken over the state of Florida. The *X-Files* episode “Excelsis Dei” (1994) grimly depicts modern institutionalization of the elderly, and *Logan’s Run* and other works depicted deliberate “disposal” of the elderly. These stories raise questions of what societies and individuals owe to one another, and what people have to offer at different stages in their lives.

Transmission of Knowledge

Transmission of knowledge is perhaps the greatest gift of elders to the young, and thus the most significant cost of conflicts between the generations. The *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode “Half a Life” (1991) explored the consequences of the loss of knowledge and experience offered by the elderly, when the scientist whose knowledge could save his world submits to ritual suicide at the age of sixty. In Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), the disruption of transmission of knowledge was deliberate: the protagonist’s mother is sent to die in a slave labor camp with other older women, because her years of knowledge and experience as a feminist activist pose a threat to the new order.

Transmission of knowledge and culture often occurs down gender lines, maintaining gendered divisions in society. From Obi-Wan Kenobi (*Star Wars*, 1977) to Ogion (Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea*, 1968), older men regularly take younger men as apprentices to train them in the “old ways” or to invest them with their hopes for social change (Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night*, 1937). Feminists have sought to reclaim the power of such traditions, exploring feminine transmissions of power and knowledge in guilds and religions, as in Marion Zimmer Bradley’s matriarchal guild on Darkover and priestesses in *The Mists of Avalon*. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and Moon’s *Surrender None* (1990), women hold and transmit unique “women’s knowledge” to other women. Tamora Pierce’s YA series *Protector of the Small* explores the complexities inherent in such gendered mentoring: Alanna, the first lady knight in the kingdom, wishes to help another young woman, Keladry—but she must do so secretly, lest she risk her own success, undermine Keladry’s military career, or appear to favor women over men.

The transmission of knowledge can pose risks to the young, as seen in some parasitic immortality and absorption stories. The individual who absorbs the life essences or memories of those who came before risks the loss of individuality, as seen in the struggles of Chung Mae in Geoff Ryman’s *Air* and monstrous Alia in Frank Herbert’s *Dune* series. Successful integrations—as in Robert Heinlein’s *I Will Fear No Evil* (1970) or Dax of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*—offer the chance for the merged minds to experience multiple genders and ages at the same time. These struggles parallel the struggle by young people to learn from their elders’ experiences while establishing their own identities, setting up themes of social revolution, the transmission of history and cultural values, and personal transformation and escape from cycles of abuse.

Numerous feminist works have resolved such potential conflicts through a vision of integrated, intergenerational communities, often using ritual to facilitate the social integration of generations and the transition of individuals into different social roles. The **utopian** Mattapoisett society in Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) ritualizes and normalizes the passing of its

elderly, as do the societies in Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* (1985) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Feminist and egalitarian rituals implicitly comment on the nonexistent, gendered, or exploitive transitions offered by present-day society. For instance, Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, **Joanna Russ’s** *Whileaway*, and E. M. Broner’s *A Weave of Women* (1978) all present humanist rituals that help women and youths fulfill their human potential. Other writers have paid particular attention to the introduction of youths to sexuality, which in mainstream society has often been simultaneously stigmatized and exploited: Le Guin’s “Coming of Age on Karhide” (1995), Patricia Kennealy-Morrison’s Keltiad series, and Jean Auel’s *The Valley of Horses* (1982) offer alternatives, and **Esther Friesner’s** *Psalms of Herod* (1995) and Louise Marley’s *The Terrorists of Irustan* (1999) offer critiques.

Family Relations

The relative lack of age diversity within SF skews depictions of intergenerational relationships. Outside of YA and social SF, naturalistic depictions of family relationships are the exception rather than the rule. Instead, family relations may function largely as thematic or plot devices. For instance, parental sacrifice permits commentary on other social issues, such as the horrors of the organ trade in the X-Files episode “Hell Money” (1996), in which a father trades his organs to pay for his daughter’s medical care. Inez Haynes Gillmore places parental sacrifice in a feminist context in *Angel Island* (1914): while winged women permitted their own wings to be clipped to preserve their families, they resist such sacrifices for their daughters.

The de-familialization of protagonists, which permits adventure unencumbered by social burdens, is present even in YA, where many authors cut the apron strings with orphan protagonists (*Star Wars*) and school settings (as in Mercedes Lackey’s *Valdemar Herald’s College* and **J. K. Rowling’s** *Harry Potter* stories). Basic human interactions are shifted from families to peers, and plot points, such as rescues, shift from parents to older siblings or non-parental adults, as in *Tank Girl* (1995) or Russ’s *The Two of Them* (1978). Maternal substitute figures, such as Spider-Man’s Aunt May or Batman’s foster mother Leslie Thompkins, are also common. Mentors, as described above, fulfill functions of advice and support that parents might otherwise perform in numerous stories.

Feminist depictions of balanced, integrated communities, with protagonists relating to characters of multiple generations, offer a pointed contrast to such works. Works by **Doris Lessing**, Nancy Springer, and Le Guin have all depicted middle-aged and older women, active and integrated in their communities. Hiromi Goto’s *A Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) integrated and incorporated the experiences of women of various ages. And Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) not only incorporates elders into the story but centers the story on a young woman protagonist, nursing a child.

CONCLUSION

Social concerns regarding age and gender form a rich strain of thematic, plot, and characterization within SF/F. However, critical examinations of and innovative approaches to the intersections of age and gender are only beginning to be explored in these genres.

Further Readings

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