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BOOK REVIEW:

Canadian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror: Bridging the Solitudes

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Ransom, Amy J. and Dominick Grace, eds. *Canadian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror: Bridging the Solitudes*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. ISBN 978-3030156848.

Canada is known for many things, but SF has not typically been one of them, with the added irony that Canada's highest-profile and most celebrated name connected with the genre, Margaret Atwood, has historically preferred her work to be known as "speculative fiction" rather than as SF. *Canadian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror: Bridging the Solitudes* (hereafter *Bridging the Solitudes*), however, happily remedies the general lack of knowledge or discussion about Canadian SF, and it serves as a broad and deep introduction to a field many might not have reason to know even exists. A wide-ranging and comprehensive collection (20 chapters in 380 pages), this edited volume is divided into sections defined by composite categories that intersect gender, race, politics, and aesthetics. This is an appropriately nuanced way of cutting into the multiple strands that constitute Canada's literary and cultural SFF production. A key question this book asks, and gives various answers to along the way, is: what makes Canadian SFF unique or worth understanding as a field in its own right? Haunting the anthology is the specter of the nation-state, in this case a settler-colonial state, built upon the land of the many First Nations it has decimated and replaced. This fact is recognised in the frequent Land Acknowledgements present in Canadian contemporary discourse; for example, when McGill University acknowledges its placement on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka. Thus, to ask "what makes and has made Canadian SFF?" is also to ask, "What makes and has made Canada?"

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One answer to this question lies in the collection's subtitle. The "Solitudes" in question refer to Hugh McLennan's novel *Two Solitudes* (1945), which "dramatizes the divide between the French and English-Canadians and the problem of Canadian unity" (154). As many writers over the years, including the editors and authors of the 1990 short-story anthology *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, have pointed out, there are clearly more than two Canadian solitudes, from the Indigenous voices that preceded the colonists and their wars, to those of the many immigrants who move to Canada every year (approximately 300,000 annually). *Bridging the Solitudes* addresses this multiplicity directly. The book is part of the Palgrave series "Studies in Global Science Fiction", which includes such titles as *Italian Science Fiction*, *Arabian Science Fiction*, and *Global Frankenstein*, and which makes an explicit commitment to studying diversity in SFF and the "ongoing debates about the expanding global compass of the genre and the emergence of a more diverse, multinational, and multi-ethnic sense of SF's past, present, and future" (ii). As such, this volume takes great care to remedy a normative, white, Anglophonic view of SFF. It does this by providing multiple chapters on writers and artists of color, including Larissa Lai, Hiromi Goto, Stanley Péan, Jeff Barnaby, and Gerry William (author of 1994's *The Black Ship*, the first Indigenous SF novel published in Canada), and a prevalent interest in themes that prize diversity and multiculturalism, including the topic of "bridging", the Canadian "mosaic", the notion of Canada as being between traditions, theorisations of the Canadian fantastic, deconstructions of national myths, and analyses of Indigenous futurism.

Bridging the Solitudes contains discussions about what constitutes a "Canadian" writer. Since William Gibson is described as "Canadian by adoption but not by birth or publication" (11), he thus receives little attention in this book, despite living and working in Canada since 1967, initially moving there to avoid the Vietnam War draft. Robert Charles Wilson, by contrast, was born in the US but moved to Canada at age seven, and with his publishing history in Canada receives a chapter: "The Affinity for Utopia: Erecting Walls and Building Bridges in Robert Charles Wilson's *The Affinities*", by Graham J. Murphy. In an era in which the nation-state is under all kinds of pressures to justify its own existence as one of the primary categories through which human life is organised, it makes sense, in a book dedicated to a specific national tradition, to question the role of literary narrative in building the nation and its ideologies, to ask what a nation-state is, and to consider the peoples and social forms it displaces and replaces. The SFF production of Canada, a site of ongoing settler colonialism, offers itself as a highly productive venue for doing just that.

After Amy J. Ransom and Dominick Grace's in-depth introduction, which clearly lays out the field and the history of Canadian SFF criticism, the book begins in the colonial past, with an excellent chapter by Allan Weiss about the colonial era: "Colonial Visions: The British Empire in Early Anglophone and Francophone Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy". In this essay Weiss considers differing visions of British imperialism depending on one's perspective, thus introducing the reader to the Anglo/Franco divide that characterises not just Quebecois society and literary production, but Canada's history and culture on a larger scale. *Bridging the Solitudes* then moves quite quickly into the twentieth century, with a fascinating essay on writer and critic Judith Merrill, who moved to Canada in 1968 from the US and whose left-wing politics

and organising played a key role in establishing Canadian SF as a field. We then move into, and largely stay in, the contemporary era for the rest of the book. The editors divide the volume into seven parts:

(1) a prologue containing the chapter about colonial narratives;
(2) "Bridging Borders: Transnationalism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Speculative Fiction";
(3) "Building Bridges: Constructing and Deconstructing Myths of the Canadian Nation";
(4) "Bridging the Gender Gap: Transnational and Transsexual Identities in Canadian SF";
(5) "Bridging the Species Divide: Technological, Animal, Extraterrestrial, and Posthuman Sentience";
(6) "Bridging the Slipstream: Generic Fluidity in Canadian Speculative Fiction"; and
(7) "Excerpts from A Glossary of Non-essential Forms and Genres in English-Canadian Literature" by Jordan Bolay, a playful outro piece.

Though grouped thematically, the chapters within each section tend to focus on one or two authors, providing close readings of one or several works. A vast wealth of material is covered, and some of the book's key themes serve as a useful summary: (a) space and place, leading to discussions of colony and nation; (b) survival, which culminates in the interesting subgenre of "bear horror"; (c) Canada as the future; and (d) community.

The topic of place and space animates many of the papers contained in this volume: Canada's colonial history, its contested present (colonial or postcolonial), and its as-yet-unknown future (decolonial? postnational?) that SFF has a mission to visualise and conceptualise. Peripherality and marginality are two guiding concepts here. Canada is not the US, and "not being the US" is unavoidably one of its main defining factors in geographical, social, psychological, and aesthetic terms. Canada's geographical peripherality is thus a driving conceptual factor in its SF production, a form of marginality that intersects with the marginalities of race, gender, ability, or economics. For instance, just think of the many films and TV shows – from *The X-Files* to *Fantastic Four* – shot in Canadian cities pretending to be US ones. Many chapters here centre the experience and works of marginalised identities in Canadian society – for example, Kathleen Kellett's chapter on the Haitian-Quebecois horror-fantasy detective fiction of Stanley Péan, Wendy Gay Pearson's chapter on "queer futurity" in Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child* (2001) and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), Kristina Baudemann's chapter on "Indigenous futurism" in the films of Mi'gMaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby, and Judith Leggatt's chapter on Indigenous speculative-fiction reimaginings of the "residential schools" that removed Indigenous children from their homes and families in order to assimilate them. And central to this volume's approach are analyses of how ideologies of Canadian pluralism and diversity manifest themselves in SF works. Of particular relevance here are the several discussions of the "Canadian mosaic", a "standard metaphor for Canada … reflecting Canada's official commitment to multiculturalism and representing the nation not as one thing or even two things" according to Ransom and Grace's introduction (2).

The topic of "Canada as the future" or as some kind of futuristic or "socialist" utopia is also a valuable guide to this volume and to critical approaches to Canadian SFF. Since the era in which slaves escaped from the United States to Canada (an image adapted by Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*), Canada has taken on the mantle of a nation that is more enlightened and progressive than the US. Describing their dissertation work on trans travel narratives in their chapter "Crossing the (Trans)Gender Bridge: Exploring Intersex and Trans Bodies in Canadian Speculative Fiction", Evelyn Deshane writes that "many American authors look to Canada as a place 'light-years ahead' of them" (216). Canada stands for the future in the North American imaginary, often in a positive, socially progressive way rather than a dystopian or apocalyptic one. Canadian futurities are also ecological and climate change futurities, as typically cold climes get warmer and frozen tundras start to turn into green spaces. What the social consequences of large migrations to northern countries will look like is a fertile topic for SF narratives, and thinking about societies in constant flux as peoples move and clash is also a thread running through Canadian SF from its early colonial, fantastic, and utopian fiction to the near-future works of Peter Watts (to whom two chapters are dedicated), Larissa Lai, and Waubgeshig Rice, among others.

Survival is a notable key theme of Canadian literature, as illustrated by the title of Margaret Atwood's book-length survey of Canadian literature, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). Survival has climatic connotations related to the Canadian winter, the harshness of long cold months and vast spaces, tundras, solitudes, expanses; "survival" also encompasses the early European pioneers and colonists, and the future travelers of a postapocalyptic landscape (as in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*); it intersects with the animal, vegetable, and mineral realms; for example, in the fascinating subgenre of "bear horror" about which Michael Fuchs writes in the chapter "'I Can't Believe This Is Happening!': Bear Horror, the Species Divide, and the Canadian Fight for Survival in a Time of Climate Change".

Finally, "community" is another password for decoding Canadian SF. The volume gives much space to Quebec and the subfield of Quebecois SF (abbreviated as "sffq" or "sfq"), including such essays as Sylvie Bérard's compelling comparison of the works of Élisabeth Vonarburg and Michel Tremblay on the theme of "holes", and Sophie Beaulé's analysis of the relationship between mainstream and SF writing in Quebec and the topic of "porosity" – the notion that Canadian writing encourages more fluidity between realism and SF. As Evelyn Deshane writes when discussing one of Robert Runté's essays, since most major figures in Canadian literature have written some form of speculative fiction, the "boundaries of Canadian literature and sff can be 'less rigid' … and sometimes even 'porous'" (213). What constitutes a community, present or coming, is very much at the forefront of Canadian conversations nationwide, spanning the spectrum between postcolonial and racial critiques of Canadian society on one end, and nationalistic propaganda and ideology, some of which weaponises the values of diversity and tolerance to uphold the neoliberal corporate state, on the other.

Bridging the Solitudes, however, ends on a playful note: Jordan Bolay's "Excerpts from A Glossary of Non-essential Forms and Genres in English-Canadian Literature". Bolay's piece, which discusses the videogame *Mass Effect*

(2007) and the progressive rock band Rush's album *Clockwork Angels* (2012), among other topics, brings to mind that what is perhaps missing from this edited volume is a slightly more substantial engagement with the wider field of Canadian popular culture, whether SF or mainstream. It would have been nice to read something here on Canadian industrial music (Skinny Puppy, Front Line Assembly) or Canadian SF television from William Shatner to *Orphan Black*, or Canadian comics and videogames. More horror would also have been appreciated; for example, chapters on David Cronenberg and Nalo Hopkinson. But these are mere subjective quibbles. Overall, Amy J. Ransom and Dominick Grace have done a fantastic job with this volume, putting together a comprehensive, in-depth milestone that serves both as a valid introduction to the field of Canadian SFF and a towering critical work within it, which conveys the key conversations, opens up many avenues for research, and transmits a strong sense of enthusiasm for delving into the underreported yet clearly rewarding field of Canadian SFF.

Biography: Daniel Lukes has a PhD in Comparative Literature from New York University, with a dissertation on masculinities in late 20th-century literature and how they are reimagined through feminist SF. He currently works as Communications Officer in the Faculty of Engineering at McGill University.