



Invited Expert Commentary

The Second Golden Age of Queer Speculative Fiction

J. Scott Coatsworth, Arizona, USA

Abstract

I've been a part of the queer writing fiction community for more than thirty years, starting with a queer writing group on AOL that I took over in the early nineties and continuing up to the present. I founded and ran the Queer Sci-Fi site and Facebook Group, and have had the chance to see the growth of Queer speculative fiction first-hand. The roots of queer speculative fiction reach way back. Samuel Delaney, Joanna Russ, and Elizabeth A. Lynn, among others, were all writing it in the sixties and seventies, and writers like Anne McCaffrey flirted with it (see *Dragons, Green*) as well. But, we're unquestioningly in a golden age of queer speculative fiction, as readers clamour for characters in which they can recognise themselves, and writers push the existing boundaries of the market place.

Date Received: 01st June 2019

Date Accepted: 20th June 2019

Correspondence should be directed to:

J. Scott Coatsworth,
Queer Fictionist, Arizona, USA
Email- scott@queerscifi.com

Prelude

There are a few past trends and tropes to be aware of that brought us to where we are today:

The Gay Best Friend: Look back ways, and you'll see some of the early inclusion of queer characters in fiction (esp. mass market fiction like TV shows and movies) was the gay best friend. Usually cute, sexless, never in a visible relationship, the GBF was a safe alternative for the mass market.

AIDS/HIV: For a while in the eighties and nineties, queer fiction became consumed by the virus – we

had so many emotions and stories that needed telling, and we often told them through the lens of fiction and speculative fiction.

Coming Out: One thing that the AIDS crisis forced us into was coming out. Gay men were outed by the disease, and many in the lesbian community stepped up to help them in their time of need. Slowly over the next two decades, the bi community and the trans community would also step out of the shadows. For a few years, coming out stories were rampant. And while they will always have a place in the community, they are

now much rarer than they once were, as we have gained visibility.

There's a Gay!: Shortly after the Coming Out phase, we began to see limited gay inclusion in more mainstream shows, usually announced with a lot of fanfare about how progressive the show was to include one of us. While welcomed at the time, this has worn a bit thin over time, especially with some franchises (Marvel Films, we're looking at you) that still have not managed to include a major gay character, much less anyone from the rest of the rainbow spectrum.

Kill Your Gays: Later expanded to Kill Your Queers, this meme came from the fact that many TV shows and films, after finally getting a queer character, would kill them off, usually in some dark or brutal manner. A community already devastated by the twin scourges of homophobia and AIDS did not look kindly on this trend.

Marriage Equality: The fight for marriage equality was deeply divisive, even within the queer community. Many people felt that it wasn't possible, not without decades of work. Others felt it distracted from the other fights we faced – health care issues, financial security, and the like – and catered too much to the rights of the L and G parts of our community, and not enough to the B, T, and A. In the end, the fight was joined, and won in only seven years from the passage of Prop 8 in California. It legitimised the community in the eyes of the general public and set the stage for where we are now.

The First Queer Spec Fic Golden Age

I've contended for a few years that we're in the midst of a golden age of queer speculative fiction. I came to it through the back door – although I had been an avid reader of sci-fi and fantasy my entire life (I read the Lord of the Rings in third grade), I had my first publication at a gay romance publisher called Dreamspinner Press.

It made sense at the time – my husband Mark was an avid reader of MM (male-male) romance, and he was well connected into the community, so when I decided to take the leap and submit my first story, it was to an MM publisher.

I started the Queer Sci-Fi (QSF) group at about the same time, and quickly found that many of the writers of queer romance were also big speculative fiction fans, and that a lot of the “romance” fiction around me was also pretty well-written speculative fiction which thrust gay characters into the heart of an epic fantasy arc or a space opera plot.

A lot of this energy came from fan fiction – folks “shipping (putting into an imaginary relationship) characters from existing shows and films. Instead of Luke and Leia, we had Luke and Lee, and instead of Frodo and Sam... well, let's just say their relationship got a little more intense.

Many of these fan fiction writers started creating worlds of their own, and the renaissance began. But for years, the lion's share of queer

speculative fiction in this arena was gay cis men, with a smaller (but fierce) following for lesbian fiction.

In the last few years, that's started to change. Readers who demanded representation for their communities – asexual, intersex, bi, transgender, non-binary, gender fluid, and more – took it into their own hands to start writing their stories. And others followed, writing characters for the whole LGBTQ+ rainbow. Sometimes these attempts were flawed, but even so, they moved the needle forward.

Not to say, there aren't still road-bumps to inclusion. A couple of years back, a group of mostly white, straight men called the Sad Puppies mounted an insurrection and managed to crowd out many more diverse works of speculative fiction from the Hugo Awards. The reaction was swift, and the Sci-Fi Writer's Association took action to prevent a repeat the next year. They also worked hard to bring more diversity into World Con, the semi-annual sci-fi gathering.

Incidences of racism have also sprouted up here and there, including one in the queer romance community last year that nearly shut down a prominent publisher.

Still, the road to progress seemed secure, until Brexit and the US 2016 election (along with the rise of the populist movement across the world) made some fear it would all come to a screeching halt.

The Trump Years

The current US administration has been no friend to the queer

community. We have taken a few steps back, particularly the trans community, as their most recent rights gains have been rolled back one by one.

And yet... things still progress. We're seeing more and more queer inclusion in popular culture—especially in film and TV. Supergirl features a trans superhero; Black Lightning and the upcoming Batwoman both feature lesbians. We're moving beyond the “There's a Gay!” phase, and seeing other parts of our community enter the limelight. Even Marvel plans to introduce a major gay character to their film universe soon. They're a few years behind, but at least there's progress.

The Second Golden Age

So here's where I think we are going next.

A couple of years ago, I ran across the word “liminal” in church. It means to be at the edge of something, and I think it perfectly suits this moment for speculative fiction and the queer community. We are on the edge of a vast expansion of our presence in the specific world, an expansion that will see both a continued normalisation of queer characters and some true breakthroughs that will change the way the world looks at us.

We as a society and as a world are in a moment of particular longing for normality after two-and-a-half years of anything but, and the queer community is no exception. Time

and time again, I hear a longing for queer characters who are just people. Who wears their queer identity the same way they wear their hair colour and favourite pair of shoes. We've moved beyond the coming out narrative, beyond the whole idea that our queer identity has to be our only one, and as society catches up, the portrayals of us have moved beyond it too to show us as people just like everyone else.

But we also have an opportunity for greatness.

In the United States, for the first time, a gay man has a realistic shot at becoming president. Gay people are finding success as athletes, preachers, singers and actors. In some ways, it feels like we've moved thirty years in the last ten. And even though the inevitable backlash, queer rights are gaining ground. Just this year, Taiwan – Taiwan!!! – accepted marriage equality.

What does this mean for speculative fiction?

It means our canvass is bigger than ever before. We can project this moment forward – as good sci-fi does – or reflect it with fantasy, paranormal or horror. Writers will soon come of age who have only known marriage equality, have never been closeted and will tell

tales my peers and I never dreamed of.

I am also seeing several writers move out of queer romance to focus more on the speculative fiction side of their works, writing stories that are radically inclusive of our community.

And the world never stops moving. For every bright light – equal rights, integration, acceptance – there is a darkness. Authoritarianism creeps up our steps, climate change already begins to wreak havoc on the world, and migrations are only likely to increase in the coming years.

All of which is fodder for our fiction, which is why I genuinely think we are entering a second Golden Age for queer speculative fiction.

I often think of that old Chinese curse – “May you live in interesting times.” It certainly applies today, and all of these trends will shape the speculative fiction of the future.

I fear for what the world will become, but I also relish the chance to try to inform it, in some small way, with my words.

In the end, we have been given a chance – we queer writers – to shape that future. And I believe we're ready to take it.