Galactic Suburbia

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Imagine it. One world where women combine naval protocols with the practices of the free love movement to prepare their crews for long-term space travel; another world where housewives contemplate killing their husbands to more effectively rebuild an America torn apart by nuclear war; and yet a third world where shopping lists—not science—reveal the true nature of the universe. For readers who opened their postwar SF magazines expecting tales about sleek technologies, heroic engineers, and exotic alien worlds, such stories must have come as quite a shock: when did sex trump technology as the key to social progress? When did shopping lists replace science as the means by which we discover the world? And perhaps most urgently: why tell SF stories—usually the province of male scientists, soldiers, and politicians—from the perspective of housewives, mothers, and other markedly feminine characters in the first place?

The stories described above are all classic examples of the women’s SF that emerged after World War II and flourished for the next two decades, providing the foundation for what we now call feminist SF. Like their male counterparts, women writing SF in the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s were deeply interested in the impact of new sciences and technologies on society. In this respect they are very much a part of
SF history. Furthermore, because these authors illustrated fundamental connections between interpersonal relations in the private sphere and broad social relations in the public arena, their stories are very much a part of feminist history as well. Throughout this book I propose that stories about life and love in what Joanna Russ once called “galactic suburbia” are deeply enmeshed in the culture and politics of their historical moment. And as artifacts of that moment, they provide us with important insight into women’s representations of the relations between science, technology, and gender at the beginning of the contemporary era.

In this chapter I map the emergence of women’s SF after World War II. I begin by briefly considering why women authors chose this particular genre at this juncture in history and how the American reading public responded to them. I then situate women’s SF in its specific literary milieus. As my case studies of Judith Merril, Alice Eleanor Jones, and Shirley Jackson show, women writing SF in this period had strong ties to a host of literary traditions including feminist utopian fiction, women’s commercial magazine fiction, and early postmodernism. By combining the tropes and techniques of these other traditions with the narrative emphases of SF, postwar women writers created an aesthetically innovative and socially engaged mode of speculative storytelling that staked claims for women’s place in America’s future.

The Rise of Modern Women’s Science Fiction

In the decades stretching from the end of World War II in 1945 to the revival of radical politics in the mid-1960s, American SF fully entered what Edward James calls its “Golden Age,” a period when the genre reached new levels of mainstream popularity. Before this time SF was published primarily in oversized pulp magazines; after World War II, innovations in mass-media manufacture and distribution led to the development of cheap, easily distributed paperback books. These innovations also led to a temporary boom in SF magazine pro-

1. More specifically, James defines the Golden Age of SF as a period that stretches from 1938 to about 1960. According to James, many of the themes and techniques commonly associated with Golden Age SF were established by the end of the 1940s, but it was not until the publishing boom of the 1950s that authors were able to explore these themes and techniques in the greater detail and length typically associated with “mature” SF. For further discussion, see Edward James, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century.*
duction. At least thirty-five new SF magazines—many of which even
had the sophisticated production values of “slick” mainstream maga-
zines and literary digests—appeared during the first half of the 1950s
alone, paving the way for an ever greater number of authors to try
their hand at this increasingly popular literary form (James 85–86).

SF also reached new levels of stylistic and thematic maturity in
this period. Throughout the 1940s Astounding Science-Fiction editor
John W. Campbell insisted that authors exchange the wildly specu-
lative and often uncritically celebratory tone of earlier SF for more
soberly accurate depictions of science and technology. Even more
significantly, he encouraged writers to think through the social impli-
cations of science and technology and to put a human face on the
sometimes overwhelmingly abstract issues attending new modes of
knowledge and new inventions (Westfahl 184). By the 1950s these
dictates had become the standard by which most written SF was mea-
sured. New publications such as The Magazine of Fantasy and Science
Fiction (which quickly developed a reputation for literary quality) and
Galaxy (which encouraged authors to question the social and moral
conventions of cold war America) provided homes for a whole new
generation of authors dedicated to producing thoughtful and critically
engaged forms of SF (James 86).

This new generation of SF authors included nearly 300 women
writers. Of course, women have always been a part of SF history.
Scholars generally recognize Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel Frankenstein
as one of the first SF (and first feminist) novels. A little more than
a century later, stories by Leslie F. Stone, Clare Winger Harris, and
Lillian Taylor Hansen were regularly featured in the pages of the first
pulp SF magazines. By the 1930s and ’40s a whole host of women had
made names for themselves as SF authors, including, most notably,
Leigh Brackett, C. L. Moore, and Andre Norton. However, few if any
members of the early SF community treated these women writers
as a unified group with overlapping thematic concerns or narrative

techniques.  

2. For an explanation of how I derived these numbers, see footnote 1 in the introd-
uction to this book.

3. Recent SF scholars—especially those dedicated to the historical recovery of wom-
en’s writing outside moments of overt feminist activity—are beginning to identify cer-
tain similarities in early women’s SF. For further discussion of the feminist impulses in
pulp-era SF written by women, see Jane Donawerth’s *Science Fiction by Women in the
Early Pulps, 1926–1930.* For further discussion of debates over representations of sex
and gender in the early SF community, see Justine Larbalestier’s *The Battle of the Sexes in
Science Fiction.*
But by the late 1940s and early 1950s, no one doubted women writers’ interest in SF. New authors including Judith Merril, Margaret St. Clair, and Zenna Henderson all published SF under their own, decidedly feminine, names. They also wrote about the relations of science, society, and gender more systematically than did their foremothers. As we shall see in the following pages, women writing for the postwar SF community regularly told stories about housewives, schoolteachers, and other conventionally feminine characters who grappled with the promises and perils of life in a high-tech era. And they began to focus on new characters in new situations as well: women engineers who balanced the paid work of starship design with the unpaid labor of childrearing; female scientists who resourcefully transformed their kitchens into laboratories; and even enlightened male doctors who aid human progress by taking on the work of mothering itself. Taken together, the stories written by postwar women authors anticipate one of the central tenets of later feminist thinking: that the personal is always already political.

What drew so many women to SF at the beginning of the modern era? Although there are a number of good answers to this question, three specific factors seem to have been particularly relevant to the rise of modern women’s SF. First, as SF author and historian Brian Aldiss proposes in *Billion Year Spree*, women turned to this popular genre after World War II because new editorial imperatives and publishing patterns invited authors to write about “less dour technologies [for] wider audiences” (263). Second, as Judith Merril noted in a 1971 retrospective on McCarthy-era literary practices, SF was “virtually the only vehicle of political dissent” available to authors writing in a moment marked by intense political paranoia and cultural conformity (“What Do You Mean” 74). And finally, as Shirley Jackson—arguably one of mid-century America’s most popular authors in any genre—told friends and family alike, SF editors could be counted on to publish tales that other editors deemed too outlandish or experimental for mainstream audiences (Oppenheimer 150). Simply put, women turned to SF in the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s because it provided them with growing audiences for fiction that was both socially engaged and aesthetically innovative. In that respect they were not much different from their male counterparts.

And yet the stories these women wrote often differed significantly from those written by men, and so it should come as no surprise that American readers responded to women’s SF in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Vocal contingents of fans, editors, and
Writers (including a very young Isaac Asimov) condemned women's SF as "heart-throb-and-diaper" storytelling produced by a "gaggle of housewives" out to spoil the fun of the genre for everyone (qtd. in Larbalestier 172–73). For such members of the SF community, tales of marriage and motherhood seemed utterly incompatible with stories about high-tech galactic adventures.  

Women also encountered more subtle forms of sexism in their quest to be recognized as part of the SF community. In a 1955 letter to *Amazing Stories* editor Howard Browne, fourteen-year-old Cathleen M. M. Harlan enthusiastically announced her love of SF and her plan to pursue a career in SF writing. But she was troubled by one thing: "I've noticed most of the writers in the s-f field are men. This bothers me for one very good reason: I'm a girl. Could you tell me why this is so? (Not why I'm a girl)" (Harlan 117). Browne's reply was brief but telling: "few women write s-f because few women are interested in science" (118). This conclusion is particularly surprising because until *Amazing Stories* changed its format in 1953, it regularly featured science columns by June Lurie and Faye Beslow. Hence, Browne's response seems to reflect a certain historical amnesia. It also reflects the extent to which even the seemingly most open-minded of postwar Americans were invested in patriarchal assumptions about the necessary relations of science, society, and gender: even when they had proof to the contrary, they unthinkingly assumed that women simply were not interested in either science or stories about it. 

But other members of the SF community were more generous in their assessment of women's interest in and contributions to the genre. *Fantasy and Science Fiction* editor Anthony Boucher described women's SF (which he regularly included in his *Year's Best* series) as a groundbreaking phenomenon that provided readers with "sensitive depictions of the future from a woman's point of view" for the first time in the genre's history (125). Similarly, in an editorial on what he cheerfully called "The Female Invasion," *Fantastic Universe* editor

4. Significantly, similar critical attitudes informed early feminist readings of postwar women's SF. In the 1970s both Joanna Russ and Pamela Sargent condemned what they called "housewife heroine" SF for simply reiterating conventional ideas about science, society, and gender. And even today echoes of this attitude can be found in Lisa Tuttle's assessment of postwar women's SF, which she sympathetically but insistently describes as comprising "sentimental stories dealing with . . . acceptable feminine concerns" (1344). For further discussion of feminist attitudes to prefeminist science fiction, see Helen Merrick's "Fantastic Dialogues: Critical Stories about Feminism and Science Fiction" as well as my essays "Unhappy Housewife Heroines, Galactic Suburbia, and Nuclear War: A New History of Midcentury Women's Science Fiction" and "A History of One's Own: Joanna Russ and the Creation of a Feminist Science Fiction Tradition."
Leo Margulies wrote that “today women work side-by-side with their men on every conceivable job in the world,” and that in the job of writing SF, women were distinguishing themselves by virtue of “their intensely imaginative minds [and] their sensitive understanding of human emotions” (161). As editors dedicated to maintaining their respective magazines’ reputations for cutting-edge fiction, Boucher and Margulies valued the new generation of women authors precisely because they brought new perspectives and literary techniques to bear on the craft of SF writing as it was then practiced. Little wonder that another such editor—Fantastic’s Paul W. Fairman—proudly proclaimed to readers, “we feel women are here to stay and that they’ll be very much a part of our world in the future” (125).

Like their editorial counterparts, open-minded fans were also appreciative of women’s writing. When Astounding editor John W. Campbell published Judith Merril’s “That Only a Mother” in 1948 he did more than premiere the story that would set the standards for much subsequent women’s SF. He induced an appetite for such stories in readers as well. Fans rated Merril’s story as the second-best published in that particular issue—just behind Eric Frank Russell’s “Dreadful Sanctuary” and well ahead of Isaac Asimov’s “No Connection.” And they begged Astounding for more. As Roscoe E. Wright put it in one of many such letters to Campbell: “this is about the finest short story I have ever seen. . . . If I ask for more, do you suppose Judith Merril would send you some more? . . . What Science Fiction needs is one—or maybe more—good yarn by a woman in each issue to give the magazine a better balance and wider appeal” (158). And when editors complied with such requests, fans were quick to provide them with positive reinforcement. In an open letter to Fantastic readers, Mrs. Lucky Rardin directly thanks Fairman and his editorial staff “for letting a couple of females into the science-fiction world. You’d think that all the women were left on Earth, forgotten, when the first space ships started climbing into space” (125). In direct contrast to those readers who dismissed women’s SF as romance fiction with no real relevance to SF’s future imaginary, fans such as Rardin were absolutely delighted to see characters resembling themselves within that future imaginary—especially when other women created them.

The wider literary community also recognized the innovative nature of postwar women’s SF. In 1950 the New York Times compared Merril’s Shadow in the Hearth—a nuclear war story told from the perspective of an average wife and mother—to the cautionary works of H. G. Wells and George Orwell, and in 1954 Motorola TV Theater
broadcast a dramatic version of Merril’s story under the title “Atomic Attack” (Merril and Pohl-Weary 99–100). And although Merril may have been the most prominent of the new women SF authors, she was not the only one to receive critical attention. In the 1950s and ’60s editor Martha Foley featured SF stories by Merril and Shirley Jackson in her Best American Short Stories anthologies. The import of this honor becomes more evident when we consider that Foley included stories by only one male SF author (Ray Bradbury) during her tenure as editor of this anthology series and that subsequent editors have included only a total of six other SF stories in it since her time.  

Clearly the authors who helped shape women’s SF as a distinctive mode of storytelling were literary forces to be reckoned with in their own day. But where did the impetus come from to take on this task? As I demonstrate in the following pages, women writing for the postwar SF community were inspired by a surprising range of literary traditions, including feminist utopian writing, commercial magazine fiction, and postmodern literature.

**Judith Merril and Women’s Speculative Fiction**

When women wrote SF in the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s, they did so in relation to a century-old tradition of speculative fiction about science, technology, and the home. As feminist literary scholars Carol Farley Kessler, Jean Pfaelzer, and Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerton have shown, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women published scores of utopian stories in which domestic reform was a central concern. In tune with the tenor of their times, utopian authors including Mary E. Bradley Lane and Charlotte Perkins Gilman linked such reform to advanced sciences that could yield “collective or mechanical alternatives” to traditional patterns of housework and childcare (Pfaelzer 50). For instance, the women of Lane’s *Mizora: A*

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5. The postwar women’s SF stories selected for reprinting in Foley’s Best American Short Stories are Judith Merril’s *Dead Center* (1954) and Shirley Jackson’s *One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts* (1955). The Bradbury stories that Foley included were “The Big Black and White Game” (1946); “I See You Never” (1948); “The Other Foot” (1952); and “The Day It Rained Forever” (1958). The six other SF stories that have been included in The Best American Short Story anthologies since Foley’s tenure are Harlan Ellison’s *The Man Who Rowed Christopher Columbus Ashore* (1991); Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Sur” and “The Professor’s Houses” (both originally published in 1982); Kelly Link’s “Stone Animals” (2004); Cory Doctorow’s “Anda’s Game” (2004); and Tim Pratt’s “Hart and Boot” (2004).
Prophecy (1881) chemically synthesize food, while those of Gilman’s Herland (1915) delegate childrearing to scientifically trained professionals. This liberates women to pursue their personal interests, develop their professional talents, and otherwise express themselves as full human beings.

The first generation of women to write SF continued this tradition of utopian speculation in the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s. As Donawerth argues, authors including Clare Winger Harris, Lillian Taylor Hansen, and Leslie F. Stone all published stories that, much like their utopian predecessors, imagined “the transformation of domestic spaces and duties” via chemically synthesized foods, automated houses, and robotic housekeepers (“Science Fiction” 138). Elsewhere Lilith Lorraine and Sophie Wenzel Ellis speculated that new reproductive technologies such as incubators and artificial wombs would enable women of the future to pursue both “further education and . . . public responsibilities” (“Science Fiction” 142). For these early SF women writers, advanced sciences and technologies could do more than simply alleviate the burden of women’s work in the private sphere. They could produce new kinds of feminine (and sometimes even feminist) agency in the public sphere as well.

For Donawerth, however, the progressive tendencies of women’s pulp SF are limited by two factors. First, like their male counterparts, women writing SF in the early part of the twentieth century tended to romanticize science and technology. This often led them to “displace their critique of the unfairly gendered social organization into unrealistic hopes for a science that would make the problem disappear” (Frankenstein’s Daughters 15). Second, women “were limited . . . by their assumptions about literary form. . . . The brief science fiction tradition that women writers inherited was entirely male in narration, and mostly first person. . . . [Stories were told] in men’s voices, about men making scientific discoveries and undertaking scientific exploration” (“Science Fiction” 145). Although women SF authors occasionally used male narrators to demonstrate how men might come around to enlightened feminist perspectives on science and society, stories written from masculine points of view threatened to erase women’s voices altogether and to turn into conventional romances where hysterical, victimized women were rescued from

6. See especially Harris’s “A Runaway World”; Hansen’s “What the Sodium Lines Revealed”; and Stone’s “Women with Wings.”
7. See especially Lorraine’s “Into the 28th Century” and Ellis’s “Creatures of the Light.”
galactic perils by rational, heroic men. At least one writer from this period depicts the promises and challenges of early SF authorship in similar terms. Leslie F. Stone recalls being drawn to this “young medium” in the 1920s because it was “fresh and new,” providing her with the opportunity to create some literary “firsts,” including the first depiction of women as astronauts and the first black SF protagonist (100). A leading member of SF editor Hugo Gernsback’s inner circle, Stone claims that Gernsback “liked the idea of a woman invading the field he had opened” and that she never had trouble selling stories to him or his successor, T. O’Conor Sloane (101). Like many later feminist SF authors, Stone valued SF because it provided her with the opportunity to explore new scientific developments and the new social orders that might attend such developments.

But Stone also remembers being constrained by the masculinist assumptions of the early SF community. At the beginning of her career a friend advised Stone to publish under an androgynous name because SF was a men’s genre and “back then, Women’s Lib was but a gleam in feminine eyes” (101). And although some members of the SF community were willing to accept an SF “authoress,” others used Stone’s gender as an excuse to attack her work. For instance, fans roundly condemned “The Conquest of Gola” because it depicts a world of technologically advanced, telepathic women who fend off conquest by the rapacious men of a neighboring planet. The relative ease with which they do so only serves to confirm their chauvinist attitudes toward the subservient men of their own world. As Stone notes, the story clearly put “females in the driver’s seat, females that dared to regard their gentle consorts as playthings. Male chauvinism just couldn’t take that!” (100) Stone finally stopped writing SF in the late 1930s when she found herself contending with a new generation of editors (including Astounding’s F. Orlin Tremaine and John Campbell as well as Galaxy’s Horace Gold) who insisted that women could not write good SF (101).

Hence, early attempts to create woman-oriented, 8. Donawerth cites half a dozen of these stories, such as Louise Rice and Tonjoroff-Robert’s’s “Astounding Enemy” in which women scientists and soldiers combat insect enemies, but the story itself is narrated by a man, and Leslie F. Stone’s “Out of the Void” in which a young female scientist attempts to voyage to Mars but is captured by an evil (male) politician and then must be rescued by her (male) lover turned revolutionary (“Science Fiction” 144–46).

9. Apparently Campbell and Gold eventually modified their opinions about women in SF, since both went on to publish authors including Judith Merril, Katherine MacLean, and Ann Warren Griffith.
feminist-friendly SF were limited not just by the narrative conventions of the field but by a network of socially conservative authors, editors, and fans as well.¹⁰

Chauvinism notwithstanding, many women continued to write speculative fiction, and by the late 1940s and early 1950s a new generation of women writers had made their way into the pages of SF magazines. Much like their pulp-era predecessors, the authors of this new generation continued to explore the relations of science, technology, and domesticity despite mixed reactions from the SF community. They also contributed to this tradition in two significant ways: by setting their stories in near futures where characters were still struggling with the social changes wrought by new sciences and technologies (rather than in faraway lands or distant futures where social change was already a fait accompli) and by narrating stories from women’s (rather than men’s) perspectives.

The close relations of women’s early- and mid-century SF are particularly clear in the work of Judith Merril, a foundational figure in SF history. Merril’s lifelong commitment to SF began during World War II when she moved to New York to support herself and her daughter through writing. There she joined the Futurians, a group of writers and fans (including such rising stars as Isaac Asimov, Frederik Pohl, and Virginia Kidd) who are often credited with setting the thematic and stylistic standards for modern SF. Over the next two decades, Merril edited a variety of prominent SF collections, including Shot in the Dark (1951) and all twelve of the Year’s Best of SF anthologies (1956–67).¹¹ At the same time she was packaging SF for outside audiences in her anthologies, Merril worked to strengthen the genre from within by establishing some of the first professional SF writing groups, including the Milford Writers’ Workshop and the Hydra Club (Merril and Pohl-Weary 270, 273).

This period of editing and organizing also marked the pinnacle of Merril’s literary production. In 1948 Merril published her first SF story, “That Only a Mother,” and in 1950 she published her first novel,

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¹⁰. Of course, women readers also had strong opinions about how SF should be written, and many of them agreed with their male counterparts that there was no room for romance or domesticity of any sort in SF. For further discussion of the gender question in the early SF community, see Justine Larbalestier’s The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction.

¹¹. For further discussion of Merril’s work as an SF anthologist and editor, see Elizabeth Cummins’s “Judith Merril: Scouting SF”; “Judith Merril: A Link with the New Wave—Then and Now”; and “American SF, 1940s–1950s: Where’s the Book? The New York Nexus.”
Shadow on the Hearth. Both works depict American women trying to survive World War III, and both won Merril a great deal of recognition as a writer.\(^{12}\) Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s Merril continued to win recognition for her experiments with female narrative voices. For example, “Dead Center” (1954), told from the perspective of a female rocket designer, appears in Anthony Boucher’s *Treasury of Great Science Fiction* (1959), G. B. Levitas’s *The World of Psychology* (1963), and Martha Foley’s prestigious *Best American Short Stories* series (1955). Thus, Merril’s stories set the paradigmatic standards for women’s SF, especially as it evolved in relation to already-established traditions of women’s speculative fiction.

In her autobiography, *Better to Have Loved*, Merril recollects turning to SF rather than other kinds of writing as a young author because it took as its basic premise “the idea that things could be different” (44–45). For Merril, SF embodied the very essence of great literature: “Some people, and I am one, also believe that art is by nature revolutionary: that a vital function of the artist is to produce and publish ‘virtual realities’ of social change. Certainly the inverse is true: no radical change can ever occur until a believable and seductive new vision is made public” (42). Much like Leslie F. Stone before her, Merril was drawn to SF by the narrative possibilities it afforded to socially conscious authors. Indeed, for Merril the task of imagining scientific and social “firsts” was more than a matter of literary pride; it was also a necessary first step toward actually enacting the kind of sweeping change that seemed to be at the very heart of the SF vision.

The continuities between postwar women’s SF and its utopian and pulp predecessors are, of course, most apparent in Merril’s stories. For example, her novella “Project Nursemaid” (1955) specifically explores how new sciences and technologies might transform conventional thinking about gender roles as they relate to childrearing. “Project Nursemaid” takes place on a future Earth where the U.S. military artificially gestates embryos on its moon base because “only those conditioned from infancy to low-grav conditions would ever be able to make the Starhop . . . or even live in any comfort on the moon” (15). To ensure that the moon children grow up feeling loved and secure,

\(^{12}\) “That Only a Mother” is one of the most extensively anthologized SF stories of all times, and one of the few postwar women’s stories that feminist SF scholars have discussed in any depth. For an exemplary reading of this story, see chapter 3 of Jane Donawerth’s *Frankenstein’s Daughters*. For my own discussion of this story vis-à-vis the specific context of postwar women’s political and literary activity, see chapter 2 of this book.
the military decides to hire hundreds of adventurous people as foster parents who will work together in small teams on rotating schedules so that no child is ever alone and no parent is ever faced with too long a stay in space. Thus Merril insists that new sciences and technologies—especially new reproductive technologies—demand new kinds of social and familial organization.

Merril’s story follows the adventures of Colonel Tom Edgerly, a military doctor who has been tapped to run the Project Nursemaid foster parent recruitment drive. Initially the drive yields poor results. Although scores of people apply for the job, Edgerly’s superiors insist that they can accept only those who are “healthy [women] of less than thirty-five years, with no dependents or close attachments . . . [but] with some nursing experience, and with a stated desire to ‘give what I can for society’” (22). Not surprisingly, Edgerly finds himself rejecting ideal candidates for absurd reasons. One is labeled “unhealthy” because she has lost a hand in the same accident that killed her entire family; another is dismissed as having “questionable moral values” because she is a former madam; and a third candidate is put on hold for the simple reason that he is a man and “we need women in the nursery” (54). As the despairing Edgerly soon realizes, for all its talk of scientific and social advancement, the U.S. military remains hopelessly mired down by impossibly idealistic and woefully outdated ideas about who might make a good parent—or, more specifically, who might make a good mother.

Fortunately for Edgerly (and the moon children) Earth women themselves are quick to recognize the gap between military thinking about motherhood and the lived reality of modern women. For instance, the madam points out that her experience creating safe homes for young women in the hostile territory of the sex industry has more than adequately prepared her for raising children in the hostile terrain of space. Meanwhile, an elderly applicant argues that her experience traveling as a retiree makes her an ideal candidate for this new mode of parenting. Eventually, the situation comes to a head when two young women who have donated embryos to Project Nursemaid band together and demand that they be considered for foster parentage even though military regulations stipulate that donor parents and foster parents must never meet one another.

Faced not just with individual applicants who can be dismissed as aberrations from some hypothetical norm but also with a growing group of “grown women, with good reason[s] for wanting to do a particular job,” Edgerly and his superiors finally reconsider their
Writers

priorities (94). As a consequence, Project Nursemaid enters a new and highly successful phase where candidates of all ages, professions, and physical abilities are welcomed as potential parents—including the newly revitalized Edgerly himself. Much like her utopian and pulp fiction counterparts, Merril explores how new sciences and technologies might free women from the biological task of reproduction and therefore leads readers to think about motherhood as a socially constructed rather than biologically inevitable phenomenon. At the same time, Merril goes beyond her predecessors because she does not displace her desire for gender reform onto what Donawerth calls the “unrealistic hopes” for advanced technologies that will magically solve all social inequities. Instead, she dramatizes both the individual and collective psychological changes that must occur before such reform can truly begin.

Merril likewise extends women’s pulp SF-writing traditions by using the transformation of a chauvinist male narrator to explore how patriarchal society as a whole might come to terms with the new social and sexual arrangements attending women’s increased participation in the public sphere. To a certain extent, “Project Nursemaid” is one such story, although Edgerly is, from the beginning, a relatively enlightened character complete with his own parental (and perhaps even maternal) instincts. Merril more directly explores the difficulty of overcoming male chauvinism in “The Lady Was a Tramp” (1957), a story considered so racy at the time that she had to publish it under the pseudonym Rose Sharon.13

“The Lady Was a Tramp” follows the story of Terry Carnahan, a graduate of the United Nations Naval Academy who has been assigned to serve as the “IBMan” (what we would now call a computer engineer) on the merchant space ship Lady Jane. Although most graduates envy Terry’s well-paying commission, the young naval officer is bitterly disappointed that he has not been tracked into the more glamorous job of Navy Space Scout. Terry’s bitterness is further exacerbated by his first glimpse of the “potbellied, dumpy, unbeautiful” Lady Jane and its motley crew, which includes a pirate captain, a drunken pilot, a mechanical engineer who never bathes, and a nudist biotechnician (198). A serious young man “stuffed to the gills with eight full years of Academy training, precision, and knowledge,” Terry seems to be the avatar of mid-twentieth-century manhood—not to mention the literal

13. Merril was enmeshed in a bitter custody battle with her former husband Fred Pohl and concerned that authoring a “dirty” story would be held against her in court (Merril and Pohl-Weary 159).
embodiment of the fresh-faced SF boy hero (199). However, as Merril goes on to contrast Terry's uptight behavior with that of the merchant tramp's relaxed crew, it soon becomes clear that he is at best an adolescent amongst adults and at worst a priggish relic of the past with no real place in the future.

Eventually, the combined kindness and obvious expertise of the Lady Jane's crew lead Terry to abandon his prejudices and embrace the tramp ship's laissez-faire social organization. When he learns that Navy protocol gives him the right to officially condemn "the psychological conditions onboard a ship," the IBMan realizes with some surprise that he has come to believe "that grease and nudity were perhaps as fitting uniforms in their ways for engine maintenance and bio work as knife-edge trouser creases were for precision computing" (212). Terry's allegiance to the Lady Jane is further cemented when the crew gives him full control of the ship's computer systems upon his first takeoff. After a few minutes of overwhelming pride the IBMan undergoes a final psychological transformation: "he forgot to be proud, and he forgot to be Terry Carnahan. . . . [he] gave back [to the ship] what she needed: the readings and scannings and comps and corrections that went to the driver's seat, to the pilot's board, to [the mechanical engineer] with the strength of ten and a tramp in his heart" (215). In the end, Terry gladly abandons his ascetic dreams of Scout glory in favor of the messy but even more thrilling reality of the tramp ship, where individual quirks (including his own primmness) are tolerated and even fostered to encourage individual excellence.

At the same time he struggles to come to terms with the alternate social order of the Lady Jane, Terry finds himself struggling even harder to deal with its alternate sexual order. When Terry first meets Medical Officer Anita Filmord (who is, at the time, engaged in some heavy group petting with the nudist biotechnician, Chandra Lal, and the drunk pilot, Manuel Ramon Decardez), he is shocked to realize that "the hippy blonde was nobody's daughter or friend, but a member of the crew and an officer in the Naval Reserve" (201). He is even more alarmed to learn that Anita uses her extensive training in medicine, psychology, and sexual therapy to mold the Lady Jane's crew into the kind of well-adjusted family essential to long-term space travel. Unable to deal with what he perceives as a bizarre mingling of public and private behavior, the young IBMan denies Anita's professional status and tries to cast her into one of two familiar gender roles. As he complains to another crewmember, "if I go to a whore, I don't want her around me all day. And if I have a girl, I damn sure don't
want every guy she sees to get into . . . you know what I mean!” (211). Bound as he is by rigid sexual mores that are as hopelessly outdated as his notions of social order, Terry cannot grasp the reality of life and love on the new frontier of deep space.

More specifically, Terry must come to terms with the fact that while Anita uses sex in her work, she is neither a whore nor somebody’s girl, but a highly skilled officer who does her job extremely well. As the ship's medic, Anita is responsible for evaluating Terry's performance during the first stage of the ship's launch. Emotionally and physically drained by five hours of complete absorption in the ship's intricate computer system, Terry loses control of himself and unleashes all his pent-up emotions at Anita, calling her a whore and shouting at her to “get away, bitch!” (215). Rather than immediately relieving him of duty as he expects, Anita leaves for a few minutes, allows the young man to cool down, and comes back and sits with him for six more hours while he completes a second shift.

Only at that point does Terry accept what the other crewmembers have been trying to tell him all along: that his hostility toward Anita derives from his own insecurities about what it means to be a man. Once he proves himself through the successful completion of his first launch—and recognizes that he could not have done it without Anita’s help—the IBMan takes his first tentative step toward embracing the adult sexuality of shipboard life: “he laughed and stepped forward . . . and the tramp was his” (216). This closing line drives home the parallels between the Lady Jane and Anita: although both initially appear to be the battered relics of a bygone order, they are ultimately revealed to be heralds of the new, more egalitarian social and sexual relations that might come into being in one particular high-tech future. Merril again extends the kind of political speculation initiated by her pulp-era counterparts, insisting that the conversion of the chauvinist male narrator is crucial not just to true gender equality but to true sexual liberation as well.

Merril’s greatest contributions to modern women’s speculative fiction may well have been her innovative experiments with stories told in women’s voices from feminine and feminist perspectives.14

14. Scholars including Pamela Sargent, Sarah Lefanu, and Jane Donawerth all agree that Merril’s narrative experiments are in fact precursors to the more overtly feminist experiments of later SF authors including Joanna Russ and James Tiptree Jr. However, these scholars focus exclusively on one story: the often-anthologized “That Only a Mother.” Here, I demonstrate how Merril continued these experiments throughout her literary career.
Donawerth notes that women who wrote utopias often used female narrators to articulate the progressive principles of their all-female societies, but that when the SF community began to establish its own generic conventions in the 1920s and early 1930s, narrative voice was granted primarily to male scientists and explorers. At best, women’s stories were related by sympathetic male narrators (“Science Fiction” 145–46). In the work of postwar SF authors such as Merril, female characters remain resolutely heterosexual and romantically involved with their male counterparts. However, this does not prevent them from having it all: families, careers, and, of course, stories of their own, told in voices of their own.

So how were writers including Merril able to introduce these protofeminist innovations into the SF community at a historical moment usually considered to be a low point in feminist history? Two distinct phenomena paved the way for this possibility. The first has to do with changes in the narrative conventions of SF. Scholars generally agree that after World War II the romanticism of early SF evolved into a more critical assessment of the relations of science, technology, and society. Merril herself attributes this change to two particularly influential editors: John Campbell of Astounding Science Fiction and Anthony Boucher of Fantasy and Science Fiction. As a “sociological science fiction” editor, Campbell extended the literary project of Hugo Gernsback before him, encouraging authors not just to explore how new sciences and technologies might develop, but also “to explore the effects of the new technological world on people” (“What Do You Mean” 67).

Meanwhile, Boucher, who was already an established professional in the relatively respectable literary genre of mystery and detection, brought to SF “a revolutionary concept: the idea that science-fiction . . . could be well-written.” More specifically, Boucher encouraged authors to think about how they represented science and society in relation to the larger “history and traditions” of literature as a whole (“What Do You Mean” 78, 80). In contrast to those first-generation editors who defined SF as a distinct mode of popular literature for scientists and engineers, second- and third-generation editors such as Campbell and Boucher explored the relations between SF and other fields of creative endeavor. Consequently, they paved the way for authors to bring other histories and traditions—including women’s histories and traditions—into SF itself.

The second change that paved the way for woman-centered SF was in the general political orientation of American women themselves.
Feminist scholars Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor note that the mid-century American press typically dismissed feminism as an old-fashioned political movement whose time had come and gone with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Nonetheless, women who came of age in the postwar era grew up immersed in the legacy of feminism, both implicitly as they reaped its benefits and explicitly as they learned about it from college professors and family members who had been involved in the suffrage movement (45, 70–71, 108–11). In essence, mid-century women who simply thought of themselves as Americans and who expected the same rights and privileges as American men were living the dream that first-wave feminists had worked so hard to secure for themselves and their daughters.

Certainly the new narrative conventions of postwar SF and the legacy of first-wave feminism both played central roles in Merril's career as an SF author. As she recalls, “I grew up in the radical 1930s. My mother had been a suffragette. It never occurred to me that the Bad Old Days of Double Standard could have anything to do with me. . . . The first intimation I had, actually, was when the editors of the mystery, western, and sports pulp magazine where I did my apprentice writing demanded masculine pen names [and characters]. But after all these were pulps, and oriented to a masculine readership. It was only irritating; and as soon as I turned to science fiction, the problem disappeared” (Merril and Pohl-Weary 156).

For Merril, a lifelong feminist and progressive political activist in her own right, SF seems to have been an ideal genre precisely because by World War II it had abandoned its chauvinist pulp magazine roots. And although some editors and fans protested vigorously against those “sensitive [stories] of the future from a woman's point of view,” at least SF provided women writers with a public forum in which to tell those stories in the first place. If anything, the very vigor of such protest suggests that when women wrote SF from feminine and feminist perspectives, they did so in ways that profoundly challenged the SF status quo.

This is certainly true of Merril's novella “Daughters of Earth” (1952), which follows six generations of women as they participate in the first waves of intergalactic exploration and colonization. Merril's story begins by revising three key patriarchal origin myths:

Martha begat Joan, and Joan begat Ariadne. Ariadne lived and died at home on Pluto, but her daughter, Emma, took the long trip out to the distant planet of an alien sun.
Emma begat Leah, and Leah begat Carla, who was the first to make her bridal voyage through sub-space, a long journey faster than the speed of light itself. . . .

The story could have started anywhere. It began with unspoken prayer, before there were words, when an unnamed man and woman looked upward to a distant light, and wondered. . . . Then in another age of madness, a scant two centuries ago, it began with . . . the compulsive evangelism of Ley and Gernsback and Clarke. It is beginning again now, here on Uller. But in this narrative, it starts with Martha.

First and most strikingly, Merril opens her novella with a list of mothers and daughters that parallels the patriarchal genealogies of the Torah and the Old Testament. The founding of earthly civilization may have been a masculine affair, she suggests, but the colonization of space will be a decidedly feminine one.

Merril goes on to imagine an alternate history of humanity’s fascination with space: rather than simply rehearsing the story of famous male astronomers and astrologers, she claims that this fascination begins with the simple, everyday speculation of “an unnamed man and woman.” And so she makes women central to space exploration not just in the future but in the distant past as well. Finally, Merril revises SF history. After beginning her recitation of this history with a conventional list of male luminaries, Merril concludes with two female narrators: Martha and Emma (the narrator of this opening passage). By making a space for women writers in the future, Merril also implicitly reminds readers that women such as herself are already part of the speculative writing tradition and that they, too, should be remembered for their efforts to inspire the human imagination.

After staking claims for women in the past, present, and future of space exploration, Merril invokes the two primary representations of women that Donawerth attributes to early SF: the exceptional female scientist explorer who is essentially one of the boys and the housewife heroine who might think scientifically within the home but who depends on her husband to act and lead in the public sphere (“Science Fiction” 142, 147). In “Daughters of Earth,” each generation of

15. Donawerth and Robin Roberts also identify a third female archetype in pulp-era SF: the beautiful but sometimes treacherous alien other. Although she does not address this stereotype in “Daughters of Earth,” Merril (like many other women SF writers before her) tends to treat her aliens quite sympathetically. For further scholarly discussion of early SF treatments of the alien other, see Donawerth’s Frankenstein’s Daughters
writers swings back and forth between these two extremes: Martha, Ariadne, and Leah all delight in the stability of settled civilization, while Joan, Emma, and Carla are bound together by a wanderlust that leads them to the edge of the solar system and beyond.

While her pulp-era counterparts generally relegated the stories of housewives and women scientists to male narrators, however, Merril allows both of her character types to speak for themselves. “Daughters of Earth” takes the form of a family history compiled and related primarily by Emma for Carla, as the latter prepares to lead humanity's first subspace voyage. Although Merril grants Emma a certain narrative authority, she balances her protagonist's account of events with journal excerpts, newspaper clippings, and oral stories from Martha, Joan, Ariadne, and Leah. Like other feminist authors ranging from Virginia Woolf in the 1920s and 1930s to Joanna Russ in the 1970s and 1980s, Merril refuses to subsume the experiences of women into a single voice but rather insists on the multiplicity of women's subjective experiences.

In doing so, Merril profoundly complicates pulp-era images of women. In many respects, her female scientist explorers are much like their masculine counterparts, brilliant individuals who long for “new problems to conquer, new knowledge to gain, new skills to acquire” (111). But these are not the only reasons that Merril's characters long for the stars. Joan leaves Earth for Pluto because “in the normal course of things, [she] would have taken her degree . . . and gone to work as a biophysicist until she found a husband. The prospect appalled her” (103). By way of contrast, the Pluto mission enables Joan to have it all—a husband and a lifelong career. Later, Emma volunteers for the first mission from Pluto to Uller in part to fulfill her lifelong dream of emulating Joan and in part to escape the benevolent tyranny of her stepfather, Joe Prell, who loves Emma but believes that she is “too direct, too determined, too intellectual, too strong” to be a real woman—by which he means a docile wife and mother (112). Therefore, Merril insists that her characters' dreams of space travel are at least partly fueled by their desire to escape the very real gender discrimination they face on their home planets.

In “Daughters of Earth” gendered experiences also impact women's careers as scientist explorers in more productive ways. When her husband dies in a dome collapse on Pluto, Joan channels her grief and Roberts's *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction*. For Merril stories that depict the female alien other in sympathetic ways, see especially “Homecalling” (1956) and “Exile From Space” (1956).
into the creation of a viable terraforming process that ensures that no other family will lose loved ones to closed city construction accidents (108). Similarly, when an Uller native kills Emma's husband, Emma rejects the retaliatory attitude of her fellow colonists and devotes herself to proving that the Ullerns are sentient beings that simply misinterpreted her husband's actions. After several decades Emma's work pays off, and when her granddaughter Carla leaves for the subspace voyage to Nifheim, she does so “in profitable comradeship with the Ullerns” (159). The conclusions Merril draws throughout this novella about the relations of science and gender anticipate those proposed by feminist science studies scholars nearly four decades later: that subjective personal experiences, including commitments to other people and what Evelyn Fox Keller calls a “feeling for the organism” under investigation, are key aspects of scientific labor.16

Perhaps Merril's most striking innovation, however, is to grant voice to those housewife heroines who stay planetbound while their daughters venture off to the stars. This demonstrates how profoundly women are affected by scientific and technological development even when they do not directly participate in it. During the preflight ceremonies for the Pluto expedition Martha tries to forget her fear for Joan and instead “look the way the commentator said all these mothers here today were feeling” (99). And yet Martha quickly realizes that all the other mothers feel just as she does: “all around her, she saw with gratitude and dismay, were the faint strained lines at lips and eyes, the same tense fingers grasping for a hand, or just for air” (99). Thus Merril distinguishes between the rhetoric of patriotic motherhood and the complex emotions actually experienced by women whose children might be sacrificed in the name of patriotism. Moreover, by literally surrounding Martha with hundreds of likeminded women, Merril underscores the point that her protagonist is not just a single hysterical woman but representative of a larger group whose hopes and fears are also part of the story of scientific progress.

Elsewhere Merril uses her housewife heroines to explore how scientific progress might even work against women’s social liberation. Although Joan becomes Pluto's leading scientific expert after her husband's death, Ariadne refuses to follow in her mother's footsteps and

16. For further discussion of the relations of science and gender, see especially Evelyn Fox Keller's *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock*; Hilary Rose's *Love, Power, and Knowledge: Toward a Feminist Transformation of the Sciences*; and the various essays collected in Evelyn Fox Keller and Helen E. Longino's *Feminism and Science*. 
instead takes refuge in the role of consort to a succession of wealthy men. She does so, however, not out of any simple desire for marriage and motherhood but so she can obliterate the memory of a pioneer childhood in which “she was effectively mother and housekeeper and wielder of authority” over her younger siblings (108). Furthermore, when her first marriage breaks up, it is precisely because “colonial pressures pushed [her] into pregnancy” (109). New sciences and technologies might allow women like Joan to have it all, but unless they are used to relieve others like Ariadne of their domestic and reproductive duties, they can hardly be considered wholly liberating.

Although Martha, Ariadne, and Leah do not always benefit from the scientific and social arrangements of their respective worlds, they are not simply victims of these arrangements either. Rather, they are complex human beings who fully participate in their respective cultures. Nowhere is this more evident than in Leah’s story. Like Ariadne before her, Leah resents pioneer life, especially as her mother’s research into Ullern psychology leads them to exchange the relative comforts of the colonists’ primary city for the more primitive conditions of a scientific outpost. At the same time, Leah feels “something amounting almost to compassion for her mother,” especially as she begins to suspect that her mother’s enthusiasm for the Ullern natives stems at least in part from the very real difficulty she has finding suitable romantic partners in either of the two small human colonies (160). Not surprisingly, the teenaged Leah rebels against the isolation and austerity of her early life by carefully cultivating a wide network of friends both in the primary Ullern colony and back on Earth as well.

When Emma and her colleagues finally establish communication with the Ullern natives, Leah surprises everyone and becomes her mother’s “best ambassador” to the other colonists and to Earth itself; combining her knowledge of her mother’s work with her own well-developed social skills—including “the tactful manipulation of other people”—to facilitate the first stage of human-Ullern space exploration (162, 163). Leah rises to the occasion not out of love for her mother or the Ullerns, but because, quite simply, she wants to become a colony leader in her own right and to attract a mate of her own by taking “a really intelligent part in discussions with the men back home” (162). Leah may not be an avatar of enlightened feminism, but she is not just a decorative ornament or submissive helpmeet, either. Instead, by concluding with Leah’s tale, Merril insists that her readers take traditionally feminine characters seriously as subjects in their own
right. After all, like their scientist-explorer counterparts, they are “all different, [and] all daughters of Earth” (97).

As one of the most prolific female authors in the postwar SF community, Judith Merril’s name was (and for many scholars, still is) synonymous with the new mode of women’s SF storytelling that emerged at this time. As close analysis of her fiction reveals, women’s SF was not just an aberration in the genre’s history but the logical extension of a speculative tradition initiated by those women who wrote utopias in the nineteenth century and pulp SF in the early twentieth century. Like her literary predecessors, Merril imagines that new domestic and reproductive technologies might ease women’s lives and positively transform gender relations in the future. She also carries on the tradition of using chauvinist male narrators who convert to more progressive mindsets to demonstrate how scientifically advanced societies might evolve more enlightened social and sexual relations.

At the same time, Merril extends the literary tradition of her utopian and pulp-era predecessors by privileging female narration and point of view in many of her stories. Indeed, she is one of the first writers to put recognizably human women at the center of her stories. This enables her to more fully develop two key character types common to pulp-era SF: the female scientist explorer and the housewife heroine. For Merril, the former was not just one of the boys but a woman whose gendered experiences conditioned her relationship to science and technology. She also refuses simple depictions of the latter as a docile helpmeet or adjunct to her scientist explorer husband, instead insisting on the housewife heroine’s complex subjectivity. Even more significantly, Merril uses the figure of the housewife heroine to interrogate the patriarchal biases often inherent in advanced scientific and technological practices themselves. And as we shall see in the next section, she was by no means alone in using this seemingly conservative figure for radical ends.

\section*{Alice Eleanor Jones and the Offbeat Romance}

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of mid-century women’s SF is not just that it gives voice to female characters but that it specifically gives voice to those associated with the home and other traditional areas of feminine influence: wives, mothers, children, and, as we shall see later, governesses and teachers. But why these figures? What
exactly do they have to do with science and technology? As I suggested in my discussion of Merril’s “Daughters of Earth,” housewives and other domestic figures do not always simply endorse conservative ideas about sex and gender but can instead expose the contradictions buried in romantic ideas about science and technology. In this section, I elaborate on this claim by showing how other women writers used that most representative domestic character, the housewife heroine, to critically and creatively engage those values trumpeted by the keepers of cold war culture.

As conservative equations between women’s SF and “heart-throb-and-diaper” fiction suggest, housewife heroines were most commonly associated with women’s magazine fiction. And it is true that many of the authors who helped shape modern women’s SF wrote for slick, widely circulated periodicals including McCall’s, Good Housekeeping, and Ladies’ Home Journal as well. For these authors, women’s magazine fiction was a potentially rich literary form that they could use to write something other than “happily ever after” romance stories that ended at the altar on a heroine’s wedding day. Tropes including “marriage,” “motherhood,” and even “the home” served as lenses through which they explored otherwise taboo sex and gender issues. Not surprisingly, such authors brought this sensibility to SF, where the generic emphasis on world building enabled them to explore how dominant cultural understandings of sex and gender were shaped by new scientific and social arrangements.

Most scholarly discussions of mid-century women’s magazine fiction are heavily indebted to Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking work on the subject. As Friedan contends in The Feminine Mystique (1963), after first-wave feminists secured universal suffrage in 1921, a new heroine emerged on the pages of women’s magazines. This New Woman actively pursued an independent identity for herself through education, adventure, and paid work. She also pursued egalitarian sex and gender relations with the New Man who admired and courted her because “individuality was something to be admired...men were drawn to [the New Woman] as much for [her] spirit and character as for [her] looks” (38). After World War II, however, the New Woman gave way to the Housewife Heroine, who was biologically designed for “sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love”

17. Authors who published in both women’s magazines and SF periodicals include Shirley Jackson, Mildred Clingerman, and Alice Eleanor Jones. I discuss Jones and Jackson in this chapter and Clingerman in chapter 2.
(43). In essence, Friedan concludes, the housewife heroine was part and parcel of the conservative—even repressive—gender ideologies characteristic of mid-century America.

Nonetheless, a few feminist scholars have proposed more complex histories of mid-century women’s magazine fiction. In her study of women’s magazines from the early 1930s to the late 1950s, Joanne Meyerowitz finds that editors and writers “asserted both a long-held domestic ideal and a long-held ethos of achievement” for women (“Beyond the Feminine Mystique” 249). More specifically, while women’s magazines always celebrated marriage and motherhood, they recognized that women had lives beyond the home as well.18 Literary scholars Nancy Walker and Zita Zatkin-Dresner have argued that “Housewife Writers” including Jean Kerr, Jean MacDonald, and Shirley Jackson used humorous, semifictionalized accounts of their own domestic lives as “a strategy for coping” with conservative gender ideals (Walker 102). By poking fun at the feminine mystique, housewife writers participated in a distinctly American tradition of humor whereby authors put seemingly lofty ideals and values in a homely context to deflate them (Zatkin-Dresner 32). In doing so, these writers—who were immensely popular and whose magazine stories inspired books, Broadway plays, and television shows—fostered a sense of community among those readers who sometimes felt trapped in their homes and overwhelmed by the demands of modern housewifery. Taken together, such studies indicate that the ideological encoding of the feminine mystique in women’s magazines was not as complete as Friedan suggests. Instead, celebrations of women’s achievements outside the home and subtle protest against the trivialization of their experience within it anticipate many of the issues that would be more directly voiced by women during the revival of feminism in the 1960s.

Although there have been no studies of romantic housewife heroine fiction to date, more general examinations of romance fiction can help us better understand how it, too, both invoked and interrogated the feminine mystique.19 Anne Cranny-Frances posits that although

18. Janice Hume makes a similar point about the range of female types in postwar women’s magazine fiction in her essay “Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Midcentury Mainstream Media.”

19. For two groundbreaking studies of how romance narratives fulfill various psychosocial needs for women readers, see Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, and Tania Modleski, Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women. For discussion of how romance authors themselves understand the relations of romance writing and feminism, see Jayne Ann Krentz, ed.,
romance narratives always run the risk of devolving into “bourgeois fairy tales” where heterosexual love erases social and political conflict, thoughtful women writers have used them to explore feminist concerns including “the nature of female/male relations in a patriarchal society and the constitution of the gendered subject” (9, 178). If authors want to write this latter kind of romance, they must meet conventional generic narrative expectations while providing readers with a “new and stimulating perspective” (2–3). Thus they must exert mastery over the codes of the romance narrative without being seduced by those codes themselves.

As we shall see in the following case study of Alice Eleanor Jones, authors of housewife heroine romances were often interested in providing readers with precisely this kind of new and stimulating perspective. In 1955, the first year of her literary career, Jones published five SF stories and two slick romance narratives, leading SF editor Anthony Boucher to predict that she would have a long career in both fields (125). Boucher was half right: although Jones never published any other SF after her initial debut, she continued to write for women's magazines including Redbook, The Ladies’ Home Journal, and Seventeen on a regular basis for another decade. Her success in the women's magazine industry led to work as a columnist for the trade magazine The Writer as well.

Significantly, a number of Jones’s essays for The Writer directly explore how commercial authors might write contemplative women’s fiction. Unlike Judith Merril, Jones never directly connected her writing to feminism or to any other political philosophy. Nonetheless, her columns suggest that she was well aware of the relations between specific modes of storytelling and dominant cultural beliefs about sex and gender. In “Ones That Got Away” Jones tells readers that they can have successful careers “writing against the odds” and addressing “subjects considered taboo” by magazine editors if they carefully consider the codes informing different kinds of popular fiction (17). She particularly encourages young authors to pay close attention to editorial comments because “slick editors know their jobs or they couldn’t keep them” (46). For Jones, editors are ideal readers because they understand both generic narrative conventions and the social and market forces informing them. As authors learn about these conventions and forces from editors, they learn how to manipulate them as well.
Jones specifically explains how authors might bend generic conventions to explore taboo sex and gender subjects in “How to Sell an Offbeat Story.” She begins by noting that there are two types of commercial romance stories. Women's magazine editors tend to prefer “sweet, fluffy, boy-girl stories” that end at the altar (18). But many slick writers such as Jones herself are drawn to a more complex type of romance story: “Suppose you simply aren’t interested in the events that end with a wedding, but rather in what comes afterward: the problems of adjustment; the children; the troubles, the quarrels, and the crises; the accidents, the illnesses, even the deaths. Suppose your mind leans more to the dark than to the bright. What if your stories are offbeat, because you are offbeat?” (18). Jones makes an important point often missed by scholars who treat women’s magazine fiction as an undifferentiated mass of fairy tales about the feminine mystique.

While stories written in the “sweet, fluffy, boy-girl” vein tend to reiterate stereotypical sex and gender relations, offbeat tales are produced by authors who quite literally write, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis puts it, “beyond the ending” of the traditional romance and the patriarchal ideology that it entails.

Because they write in relatively uncharted narrative spaces, offbeat authors can explore how gendered identities that seem to be fixed by archetypical events (a first kiss, a wedding, the birth of a child) might actually change over time. This literary activity closely resembles the feminist project of analyzing how dominant beliefs about sex and gender change in relation to specific historical and material forces. As such, authors like Jones who chose to write about “the dark” rather than “the bright” aspects of mid-century womanhood took the first important step toward identifying those social and sexual inequities that fueled the women’s movement of the following decades.

Understanding the narrative conventions of romance stories also enabled mid-century authors to better anticipate how they might successfully address taboo subjects without alienating readers. For Jones,

20. Scholarly assumptions about the conservative nature of romance fiction—and by extension all mass culture—derive from two primary sources: Marxist critics of the 1940s and 1950s (most notably, Max Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse) and feminist critics of the 1970s and early 1980s (such as Ann Douglas and Germaine Greer). For further discussion of this critical legacy on contemporary scholarship, see Modleski, Loving with a Vengeance.

21. Contemporary authors continue this tradition of offbeat storytelling through the creation of “dark romances,” where love stories frame serious explorations of women’s physical, psychological, and social issues. For further discussion, see Mary Jo Putney’s “Welcome to the Dark Side.”
the litmus test is getting the offbeat story past the sharp-eyed editor:

After you have been around a while you will learn to get around the taboos in many subtle ways without . . . compromising yourself. You do it by giving your story a switch. . . . Do you want to write about a forty-three year old heroine? Do it. Despite what editors profess to believe, women do not stop reading at the age of thirty-five. . . . To get past the editor, make her a young-looking forty-three, and give her charm, wit, and style. Maybe the editor is forty-three himself and has a wife the same age, who he still finds charming. . . . The first editor [I tried this on] didn't fall for my [forty-three year old character], but the second, third, or fourth one did. ("How to Sell an Offbeat Story" 20)

The switch that Jones describes here is, in essence, the careful manipulation of generic conventions. By giving editors and readers what they think they want—conventional depictions of seemingly idealized women—authors create spaces for themselves to explore issues that seem to be outside the limits of light fiction.

This is certainly true of Jones's own magazine fiction. Every one of her slick stories revolves around domestic affairs, and her protagonists are almost always married women or teenaged girls on the brink of engagement. And yet the passage to marriage and motherhood is never easy in Jones's fiction. Newlywed couples are too overcome with sexual anxiety to consummate their marriage; men find that they must be both father and mother to their children after their wives die in childbirth; and women learn that both they and their husbands secretly resent the demands of modern parenthood.22

Jones's very first slick publication, "Jenny Kissed Me," sets the pattern characterizing most of her romantic magazine fiction. Initially, the story seems to be a simple coming-of-age tale in which a tall, gawky, intellectual teenager named Jenny discovers the beautiful woman inside her with the help of Paul, a wise and gentle family friend. When the young woman concludes their first and only date by asking if Paul believes that anyone will ever marry her, he immediately and sincerely replies, "I have no doubt of it. . . . If they don't, I'll come back in five years and marry you myself" (17). Hence, Jenny's initiation into the feminine mystique appears to be guaranteed, and her fate as a future housewife heroine sealed.

And yet the interior details of Jones's story complicate this simple

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22. See, respectively, Jones's short stories "The Honeymoon," "Morning Watch," and "One Shattering Weekend."
narrative trajectory. The real drama here is not so much between Jenny and Paul as between Jenny and her mother, Margaret, an “exquisite” woman who embodies the ideals of postwar femininity. Margaret is a shallow but happy woman, comfortable in her middle-class respectability, who longs for Jenny to lead a life much like her own. Accordingly, she attempts to remake Jenny in her own image by giving her a party frock much like the one she herself wore as a teenager. On Jenny, however, the dress is nothing more than a nightmarish “froth of pink tulle with a voluminous overskirt that made her look enormous” (17). If Margaret embodies the psychosocial forces brought to bear on girls as they become women, the pink dress represents a specific kind of culturally sanctioned femininity that only underscores Jenny’s discontent with the world around her.

Meanwhile, Paul turns out to be not so much the representative of a romantic love that smothers out all ideological disruptions as a catalyst that brings them out into the open. A sophisticated political analyst from Washington, Paul responds to Jenny for what she is, buying her books of poetry and helping her transform the frilly party dress into a sophisticated evening gown that matches her personality. He also takes Margaret to task for browbeating Jenny, forcing her to admit that she has been “very stupid” in trying to change her daughter (17). Thus, Jenny gets to keep her intellectual independence and become a young woman on her own terms. As such, Jones’s story echoes the tradition of New Woman magazine fiction as described by Betty Friedan, extending that prewar feminist tradition well into the antifeminist climate of postwar America.

Conversely, Jones’s later housewife heroine stories look forward to the concerns of second-wave feminism. “The Real Me” (1962) follows several days in the life of Patricia Cameron, the wife of a university professor at a women’s college and the mother of four small children. Like the heroines of other women's magazine stories, Patricia meets the chaos of family life with good grace and humor, deftly juggling dishes, a broken refrigerator, den mother duties, a cemetery plot salesman, a child with measles (which he of course passes on to his siblings and the rest of the neighborhood children), and an unexpected dinner party for her husband’s boss, all in the course of a single day she insists “wasn’t so bad” at all (140). Once again, Jones seems to have written a thoroughly conventional story, this time celebrating women’s natural domestic talents.

However, Jones switches out her story by introducing an offbeat character who quite literally challenges the feminine mystique: the brashly feminist Miss Kent, whom Patricia and some other faculty
wives meet during a public lecture night at their husbands' college. Miss Kent exhorts her listeners to remember the history of women's emancipation and to carry it over into their own lives, at least in their leisure moments: “when you marry, keep your own individuality, you own intellectual interests. Don’t be ‘just a housewife,’ be a complete person” (137). Initially, Patricia rejects Miss Kent's words as those of an uninformed spinster; during what she calls “the measles day” she asks rather bitterly “Leisure, Miss Kent? What leisure?” (138). Even here, Jones's story seems to rigidly follow a pattern identified by Friedan in her own discussion of housewife heroine fiction, pitting the saintly, devoted wife and mother against the misguided single career woman (Friedan 46–47).

The twist in the end, interestingly enough, is one that Friedan herself would have recognized. After thinking about it for several days, Patricia admits that Miss Kent was “right in everything [she] said” and that “the measles day was not a typical day in my life—if it were, I'd be needing psychiatric help” (140). Accordingly, Jones's protagonist decides to reorganize her domestic duties and resume the writing career she gave up when she first married. In the end, she concludes, “I am a better wife and mother for being a private person, too. I am ‘Mom’ and ‘Honey,’ but I am also me. So thank you, Miss Kent” (140). Just one year later, Friedan similarly concluded The Feminine Mystique with a call for modern American women to “combine marriage and motherhood and even the kind of lifelong personal purpose that was once called ‘career’” (342). In essence, both authors invite readers to engage in a new kind of romance, one centered upon love and respect for themselves and the other women around them.

A similar offbeat, critically engaged sensibility informs much of Jones's SF writing as well. Although she published only five SF stories at the beginning of her literary career in 1955, each demonstrates Jones's careful understanding of the genre and its narrative conventions. For example, her two stories written from masculine perspectives, “Life, Incorporated” and “The Happy Clown,” are biting condemnations of postwar consumer culture along the lines of Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth's The Space Merchants (1952) and Fritz Leiber's The Green Millennium (1953). “The Happy Clown” is a particularly prescient example of what SF scholars David Pringle and Peter Nicholls call “the media landscape story” (792) because it explores how television advertising might literally shape the world of its viewers.

In her other stories, Jones invokes the tradition of women's speculative fiction writing. For instance, “Recruiting Officer” is a sex
role-reversal story much like Leslie F. Stone's “The Conquest of Gola,” where women are depicted as both intellectually and physically superior to men (Weinbaum 471). In “Recruiting Officer,” an alien from an all-female world is sent to Earth to “recruit” unwitting young men as sexual playthings for her people. After a long and successful career, Jones's protagonist encounters a series of mishaps that force her to withdraw from Earth without the one boy she wants for herself. Although she is saddened by this loss, she takes comfort in the prestige she has already earned in her own world—and in the arms of another, equally charming young man because, “as is the custom, they had saved one of the best for me” (101). Like her pulp magazine predecessors, Jones imagines alternate worlds where women might enjoy men without being particularly dependent on them in any significant way.

But Jones did more than simply extend older traditions of women's speculative fiction into the present day of mid-century America. She was also, as Anthony Boucher noted, an important contributor to the new tradition of women's SF (125). The two Jones stories that most clearly belong to this new mode of SF, “Miss Quatro” and “Created He Them,” demonstrate two very different ways that women writers could import the thematic concerns and literary techniques of offbeat magazine fiction into science-fictional landscapes. “Miss Quatro” is a conceptual breakthrough story in which characters (and readers) are suddenly presented with a new body of knowledge that transforms their perception of reality (James 91). Given Jones’s affinity for slick magazine storytelling that relies on a twist in perspective, it is hardly surprising that she would gravitate toward its generic equivalent in SF as well. “Miss Quatro” tells the tale of a shy, selfless woman whom other characters describe as “the perfect housekeeper and perfect nursemaid” (58). When she is not scrubbing her employers' house or meticulously polishing their silver, Miss Quatro devotes herself to the neighborhood children, cheerfully entertaining them with endless hours of stories. More than mere spinster lady or hired help, Miss Quatro transcends her station to become a living avatar of the feminine mystique.

The twist occurs when her employers and their neighbors begin to wonder if the saintly Miss Quatro could really be of this Earth. The answer, of course, is no: she is actually the enslaved scout of an alien race who feed on human children. But Miss Quatro has come to love

23. For further discussion of women's celebratory sex role-reversal stories, see Roberts, A New Species.
humanity, and so she declares that “I will not go back!” and destroys herself to foil her masters’ plans. Thus, Jones implicitly critiques postwar gender ideals, suggesting that the only women who can really embody the feminine mystique are enslaved aliens. As such, “Miss Quatro” articulates a point of view that must have been very familiar to those unhappy wives and mothers whom Friedan documented so extensively in *The Feminine Mystique*.

Significantly, Jones is careful to prevent readers from assuming that Miss Quatro’s death is just another example of the good little woman who sacrifices herself for her children, depicting it instead as a gesture of solidarity with the human women around her. With a few cynical exceptions, the human women who know her treat Miss Quatro affectionately, showering her with compliments and gently admonishing her to take more time for herself; at one point her employer, Edith Horton, quite literally takes work out of Miss Quatro’s hands and begs her to rest. In the end, Miss Quatro makes clear that her death is a gift to these women. With her last breath Miss Quatro tells the children who surround her to “go home. . . . [Your mothers] will be kind to you as they have been kind to me. I was not a slave here. A slave has no pride, and I am proud now” (63). More than mere protest against the deathly confines of the feminine mystique, “Miss Quatro” holds out the hope that women might overcome domestic isolation and become something more than obedient housekeepers and submissive nursemaids.

Finally, “Created He Them” illustrates how Jones applies the techniques of offbeat storytelling to SF to perform both gender and social critique. Once again, the story revolves around a housewife heroine who seems too good to be true. Living in a near future where the United States has just barely managed to survive a massive nuclear war, the “plain but proud” Ann Crothers seems to have single-handedly preserved the mid-century ideal of feminine domesticity and fecundity. In contrast to the majority of her neighbors, who have been rendered sterile by atomic radiation and are rendered further helpless by chronic food and medical shortages, Ann has married, created a fairly comfortable home for her family, and borne seven healthy children (an eighth is on the way at the beginning of the story). And so Jones’s protagonist seems to be a testament to the endurance of the feminine mystique in even the most catastrophic circumstances.

Again, however, Jones gives her story a twist that invites readers to ponder the taboo subject of how personal relations are constituted by public forces. Here, the culprits are not faceless aliens but the
men of Earth themselves. The United States survives World War III precisely because the government enforces strictly regulated marriages between those few individuals who can still "breed true" (36). Additionally, parents must contend with the dreadful knowledge that if their offspring survive past the age of three, they will be taken away to mysterious government centers where, "if any child were ever unhappy, or were taken ill, or died, nobody knew it" (34–35). Therefore, Jones suggests that nuclear war does more than merely produce genetic mutation. It mutates the natural order of marriage and motherhood as well.

Here Jones appears to depart from the message inherent in her other stories. Elsewhere, protagonists like Jenny, Patricia, and Miss Quatro chafe against their psychosocial conditioning into the feminine mystique. In "Created He Them," the tragedy seems to be that women like Ann are permitted only a gross parody of it. However, that argument is something of an oversimplification. Throughout all her stories Jones challenges the notion that women are solely destined for hearth and home, suggesting instead that those things should be part of a much larger and richer life for women. As such, "Created He Them" extends the argument Jones offers elsewhere: that women are confined to specific, socially constructed roles by forces beyond their control in the name of both nature and necessity. In this story the dramatic circumstances of World War III create a situation where women are harnessed as breeding machines but denied even the dubious comfort of believing that they therefore fulfill their natural roles as homemakers and caretakers.

Moreover, by showing how mid-century America’s most dearly held beliefs about sex and gender might be twisted almost beyond recognition by nuclear war, Jones creates a protofeminist critique of masculinist science and technology. In this postapocalyptic world nuclear war does little or nothing to preserve the nuclear family. Rather, it pits parent against child and wife against husband in depressing and potentially disastrous ways. Consider Henry Crothers's behavior toward his family. Upon learning that Ann is pregnant with their eighth child, Henry moans, “Oh God, now you’ll be sick all the time, and there’s no living with you when you’re sick” (35). However, he perks up when he remembers that another child equals "another...

24. As I shall discuss extensively in chapter 3, the nuclear holocaust narrative as domestic tragedy became one of the primary ways mid-century women writers voiced dissent from what they saw as the masculinist and militaristic tendencies of cold war America.
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A "bonus" from the government—one that he immediately decides he will invest in the stock market rather than in the renovations that the children's nursery so desperately needs (35). Because Jones has already established that this is a world where parents have very little control over their children's lives, Henry's attitude is reprehensible but understandable. The logic of a war-oriented culture reproduces itself at every level of society: just as the government treats its adult citizens as objects of genetic manipulation, individual citizens like Henry Crothers treat their own children as objects of economic exchange.

And Jones insists that even the most devoted women are subject to these terrible new forces as well. Ann loves her children, but that does not stop her from using them as barter. Noting in despair that "things [are] so hard now, and Henry [is] difficult about what he likes to eat," Jones's housewife heroine spends her day on the street with her childless neighbors, trading quality time with her children for black market goods including eggs, cigarettes, and sleeping pills (32). Although Ann claims to detest these "transactions," she does nothing to stop them and returns home each day only after her shopping bag is full (32). Much like fatherhood, motherhood in this story is not just natural instinct. It is also, and even more specifically, a collection of behaviors produced by the bad social arrangements of an embattled world.

Jones makes what is perhaps her strongest case against the cultural logic of the nuclear age in the final scenes of her offbeat story, where she suggests that total war between nations will inevitably lead to total war between the sexes. From the beginning of "Created He Them" it is clear that Ann is less than sanguine about her husband; she freely admits, "I hate him. I wish he would die" (31). At the end of the story Ann almost makes good on this wish when she responds to Henry's bullying behavior with the threat that "I'll hit you back, I'm bigger than you, I'll kill you!" (36) Jones's protagonist seems ready to shed the role of the housewife heroine once and for all as she refuses to submit to either her husband or the entire social order that demands her submissiveness.

Although Ann's defiance stops Henry in his tracks—and leaves the reader hoping that somehow individual will can triumph over social convention and that Ann really will follow through with her threat—it is not to be. Perversely excited by his wife's words, Henry begins to laugh—and promptly orders Ann to have sex with him. Deflated by her failure to change anything, Ann tells Henry she is simply too
tired. When that fails, she glumly follows Henry up the stairs, comforting herself with the hope that she can mitigate the horror of her husband's embrace with the sleeping pills bartered earlier that day over the bodies of her unwitting children (37). In the end, Jones suggests that although some divine being may have originally "created he them" to go forth and multiply in joy and sorrow alike, in the brave new world of the atomic age the best a woman can hope for is to go forth and multiply in a drug-induced haze.

As the case of Alice Eleanor Jones suggests, stories about housewife heroines and other domestic figures were often anything but mundane reiterations of conservative mid-century gender ideologies. Instead, when authors put such characters in "offbeat" situations, they held the power to critically engage a range of emergent scientific and social relations, especially as those relations impacted women and their families. Much like Judith Merril, Jones produced fiction that bridged the concerns of feminists at the beginning and end of the twentieth century. While mainstream stories such as "Jenny Kissed Me" hold forth hope that the liberated New Woman of first-wave feminism might somehow survive the family "togetherness" of the postwar era, SF tales such as "Created He Them" explore the cost of such togetherness in brutal detail.

By placing domestic figures in fantastic science-fictional landscapes, authors including Merril and Jones created, as Cranny-Frances puts it, "a site for the allegorical description of social injustices displaced in time and/or place from the reader's own society, but still clearly recognizable as a critique of that society" (9). But this was not the only way that mid-century women writers used domesticity in their fiction. As Shirley Jackson's writing reveals, the seemingly mundane tropes of family and home could serve as powerful tools through which to explore the limits of rational knowledge and the social construction of reality. As such, postwar women's SF anticipated both feminist and postmodern literary practices.

**Shirley Jackson and Domestic Fabulation**

As Robert Scholes argues in his groundbreaking literary study, *The Fabulators*, interest in the social construction of reality permeates the writing of many early postmodern authors including Lawrence Durrell and Iris Murdoch in England and John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut in the United States. Taken together,
the antirealist stories produced by these authors comprise a coherent body of “fabulist fiction” that “tends away from the representation of reality but returns to actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy” (11). More specifically, fabulators invoke the conventions of genre fiction to orient readers to a certain representation of reality and then gradually direct them to a “more abstract and philosophical level” through the adventures of characters that move effortlessly (if sometimes unwillingly) between different worlds ruled by different systems of meaning (111). In doing so, fabulist authors illuminate the narrative forces that inform our shared understandings of reality.

In *Structural Fabulation* Scholes directly links postmodern fabulation to SF, proposing that fabulation “offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in a cognitive way” (29). This definition, Scholes notes, parallels Darko Suvin’s oft-cited description of SF as storytelling set in an alternative historical framework that operates upon the reader through “the technique of defamiliarization or estrangement” (46). As practitioners of “cognitive arts” produced by humanist thinking, both fabulist and SF authors turn their critical gazes on intellectual order, especially as it is expressed through the “attitudes and values that shaped science itself” (31, 30). The stories produced by this critical engagement can either show how scientific modes of thinking expand our understanding of what constitutes the world around us, or they can demonstrate how such thinking might limit us by its insistence on the primacy of the rational and the material.

Although Scholes focuses primarily on men such as Walter Miller, Theodore Sturgeon, and Frank Herbert in his discussion of “borderline or extreme” authors who blur the boundary between postmodern fabulation and SF, women also produced this kind of literature throughout the postwar era. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the work of Shirley Jackson. Darryl Hattenhauer notes that much of Jackson’s fiction is fabulist in both form and content, as it revolves around seamless transitions between reality and fantasy and the different epistemologies that attach to different orders of being. In essence, her stories are modern morality tales where “the protagonist may not perceive or benefit from an epiphany, but sometimes

25. Scholes devotes a great deal of attention to one woman who blurs the boundaries between mainstream fabulation and SF in her writing: Ursula K. Le Guin. However, in doing so he implicitly reinforces the conventional belief that most women did not engage in politically or philosophically progressive writing until the revival of feminism in the 1960s.
the reader can” (6). Much like her contemporaries John Barth and Kurt Vonnegut, Jackson is an early postmodernist who uses generic themes and narrative techniques drawn from different aspects of modern literary history to interrogate the philosophical, moral, and intellectual arrangements of present-day America.

Jackson said as much herself soon after the publication of her first novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948):

> I have had for many years a consuming interest in magic and the supernatural. . . . I think this is because I find them a convenient shorthand statement of the possibilities of human adjustment to what seems at best to be an inhuman world. . . . [I am also interested in] the preservation of and insistence on a pattern superimposed precariously on the chaos of human development.

> I think it is the combination of these two that forms the background of everything I write—the sense which I feel, of a human and not very rational order struggling inadequately to keep in check forces of great destruction, which may be the devil and may be intellectual enlightenment. (qtd. in Oppenheimer 125)

In this passage Jackson identifies both the popular genres with which her fiction would come to be most closely associated—gothic and weird fiction—as well as their roles within her larger body of work. Rather than simply celebrating the irrational, Jackson deploys elements of the fantastic to explore one of the most peculiar (and irrational) beliefs of the modern era: absolute faith in moral and intellectual order.

And yet, Jackson’s fabulation differs from that of her male counterparts in that it typically revolves around women’s lives and concerns. In this respect her writing anticipates what SF scholar Marleen S. Barr calls feminist fabulation: “Feminist fabulation is feminist fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the patriarchal one we know, yet returns to confront that known patriarchal world in some cognitive way. Feminist fabulation is a specifically feminist corollary to Scholes’ ‘structural fabulation.’ Structural fabulation addresses man’s place within the system of the universe; feminist fabulation addresses woman’s place within the system of patriarchy” (*Lost in Space* 11). As Barr suggests, fabulation is a useful narrative tool for women writing from a distinctly political perspective because it enables them to do more than simply ask questions about the social construction of reality or the limits of the scientific knowledge used
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to describe that reality. It enables them to identify patriarchy as the specific historical and material force informing consensus reality and its representations. As such, feminist fabulation takes the first critical step toward transforming the world into a more productive and equitable place for all.

Because Jackson's stories are so often set in the home and peopled by women who understand themselves as wives, mothers, or daughters, they are most accurately thought of as a variant on feminist fabulation that I call "domestic fabulation." James Egan notes that in many stories "searches for the domestic and the familial lead Jackson's characters into the realm of the fantastic" (17). In other tales, S. T. Joshi contends, characters stumble into fantastic worlds in the course of mundane pursuits such as "riding a bus, employing a maid, taking children shopping, going on vacation, [and] putting up guests" (11). Elsewhere, John G. Parks, Darryl Hattenhauer, and Lynette Carpenter all suggest that Jackson draws on gothic tradition to depict homes as social microcosms for larger battles between patriarchal and feminist ways of knowing the world. From this perspective Jackson's houses are both places of constricting male authoritarianism and spaces that enable "female self-sufficiency" (Carpenter 32).26 Taken together, these diverse arguments about Jackson's use of what Joshi calls "the domestic weird" indicate the diverse ways that domestic fabulation can be used to demonstrate how preferred ways of knowing the world may be limited and self-contradictory.

Domestic fabulation encompasses a surprising range of Jackson's stories. It is perhaps most evident in Jackson's domestic comedies—semiautobiographical sketches published in various women's magazines and collected in two books, Life Among the Savages (1953) and Raising Demons (1957)—which often revolve around meditations on the universal relations of order and disorder as they are filtered through the lens of domesticity. Even the most homely modes of order take on cosmic significance in these vignettes. For example, in Life Among the Savages Jackson begins a story about housewives' shopping lists with the claim that "I have always believed, against all opposition, that women think in logical sequence" (77). However, she goes on to demonstrate a very different and much larger point about human perception. As readers soon learn, Jackson's academic

26. While Parks and Hattenhauer focus primarily on Jackson's use of the gothic house as an allegorical space in which to expose patriarchy as limiting and deforming female subjectivity, Carpenter explores how Jackson depicts the home as a space of female creativity and resistance to masculine authority.
husband cannot decipher her shopping lists because they are based on Jackson’s walking routes through the local village rather than abstract logic (77–78). Meanwhile, Jackson herself cannot communicate with other housewives because conversations turn into “double-listings” based on different households’ needs rather than true meetings between individual minds (82). Therefore Jackson suggests that no two humans can ever truly share the same sense of logical sequence.

The ultimate problem for Jackson, however, is not the disparity between individual minds but the wild proliferation of order itself. By the end of the shopping list vignette Jackson the narrator completely loses control of her lists as they spawn ever more fabulous permutations: a list of china Jackson wants leads to a new list of ways she imagines upper-class families with nice china might behave, which leads to a new list of the domestic help she would require if she were rich, which leads to another list about family heirlooms that would make her feel rich, which leads to a new list about the price of household goods, and so on. Eventually, Jackson concludes, “you can start from any given point on a list and go off in all directions at once, the world being as full as it is, and even though a list is a greatly satisfying thing to have, it is extraordinarily difficult to keep it focused on the subject at hand” (79). And so the housewife’s shopping list represents what Jackson elsewhere calls the ineffectual but necessary attempt to take control of an indifferent universe.

While Jackson’s domestic comedies treat the problem of order in a relatively lighthearted way, her mainstream novels provide readers with more serious meditations on the social construction of reality. As in her comedies, these domestic fabulations most often take place in the private sphere of the home. For example, *The Sundial* (1958) follows a group of women as they seek control over the Halloran estate. Although the women strategically enact violence to get what they want, their preferred methods of battle are narrative. The primary contest occurs between the current matriarch of the family, Orianna

27. Although *The Sundial* was perhaps the least warmly received of Jackson’s novels during her lifetime, it is the one that receives the most extensive critical attention today. For discussion of the novel’s proto-postmodern elements, see Hattenhauer’s *Shirley Jackson’s American Gothic*. For discussion of how Jackson uses gothic elements to critique the debilitating legacy of patriarchy in *The Sundial*, see Egan’s “Sanctuary: Shirley Jackson’s Domestic and Fantastic Parables.” And finally, for an assessment of this novel as one of Jackson’s most explicit commentaries on contemporary life, see Richard Pascal’s “New World Miniatures: Shirley Jackson’s *The Sundial* and Postwar American Society.”
Halloran, and her sister-in-law Fanny. Orianna attempts to secure the estate through a series of legal and illegal maneuvers: marrying the family heir; providing him with a son; and then pushing the son down a staircase and killing him so that, as a grieving mother, she may claim the Halloran fortune for herself. Fanny fantastically but powerfully contests Orianna's claim to the estate by announcing that her dead father has prophesied an apocalyptic cleansing of the Earth. Only those who remain in the Halloran household—and who follow the deceased patriarch's rules as Fanny relates them—can hope for salvation. In response, Fanny redirects the attention of the Halloran household to a different and presumably higher order of reality. This enables her to trump Orianna's legalistic claims to the estate and secure it as her own domain.

These two contesting versions of reality inevitably cancel out other, more benign narratives of order. Tempted by the thought that she might rule not just a single estate but a whole new world, Orianna temporarily allies herself with Fanny and encourages all the members of the Halloran household to throw themselves into preparation for the end days. When it becomes clear that there is not enough room in the house to store all the supplies they have been stockpiling, Fanny orders the Halloran library cleared of its books and Orianna cheerfully burns them to ashes, noting that "they were none of them of any great value. . . . Not a first edition among them" (120). Jackson concludes that there is little room for the life of the rational mind in the face of materialism and moral fervor.

Of course, these new modes of order are open to contest and reinterpretation—and once again, especially by those with their own interests in the Halloran estate. When another local apocalyptic group, the True Believers, learn about Fanny's visions, they immediately descend on the Halloran home to ally themselves with Fanny and Orianna. However, they do so not out of sympathy for their fellow believers but because "we got to get a place to meet" (100). Meanwhile, Orianna's friend Augusta Wilson—a bold woman who freely admits "it's money we need"—attempts to make herself indispensable to the Halloran family by leading a number of séances to clarify Fanny's original visions (58). Fortunately for Augusta and her daughters, the séances predict that in contrast to the True Believers, the Wilsons will be allowed to stay at the Halloran house during the coming apocalypse. Although Fanny's visions might succeed in balancing the chaos implied by Orianna's illegal ascendancy to the head of the Halloran household, her model of order is by no means a
definitive one. Instead, the ambiguity of religious prophecy makes it susceptible to manipulation by those with ulterior motives.

Even the secondary household members who have no chance of wresting control away from Orianna or Fanny take advantage of the clean break from history implied by apocalypse to exercise their own narrative powers in small but astonishing ways. As a kind of psychological defense against manipulation by their overbearing mothers, Orianna’s daughter-in-law, Maryjane, and Augusta’s daughter, Arabella, tell each other elaborate stories based on popular film scenarios, casting themselves as brave heroines who defy all odds to become mistresses of their own destinies. Meanwhile Essex the librarian copes with the loss of his beloved books by madly spinning sordid tales about the Halloran women as morally depraved creatures ruined by pirates and Indians who casually pick up serial killers for their amusement. Storytelling in this novel operates much like shopping lists do in Jackson’s comic vignettes: although it provides a starting point from which to organize one’s relations to the larger world, it also “goes off in all directions at once” (Life Among the Savages 79).

Like other fabulators including Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon, Jackson ultimately refuses the kind of narrative closure that would enable readers to determine which set of stories—and which set of power relations—will prevail in the end. When Jackson’s characters find Orianna dead at the bottom of a staircase on the eve of the apocalypse, it seems that the game is over and that rough justice has been served by Orianna’s granddaughter, Fancy, who has threatened to avenge her father’s death in just this way from the very beginning of the novel. However, when Fancy takes Orianna’s tiara and proudly announces that it is “my crown now” (239), are we to assume that she has stopped her grandmother’s madness, or that she will simply repeat it in some exacerbated form? Jackson’s readers never find out because the novel ends a few pages later, with Fancy and all the other members of the Halloran estate boarded up inside their house, waiting for the apocalypse to begin. Jackson’s characters (and readers) are left hovering on the edge of an endlessly deferred revelation.

Given the similarities between structural fabulation and SF, it is not surprising that some of Jackson’s most critical examinations of epistemological order appeared in SF magazines. Her first SF story, “Bulletin” (1954), takes the form of a history exam from the year 2123 that asks students to assess the veracity of claims ranging from “the aboriginal Americans lived above-ground and drank water” to “the hero Jackie Robinson is chiefly known for his voyage to obtain the golden
fleece" (47, 48). Meanwhile, “The Missing Girl” (1957) relates the tale of a teenager who disappears from her summer camp. Frustrated by campers who do not remember her, counselors who claim to have rejected her application, and a family who does not remember sending a child to camp, the local police soon abandon the case. By this point, however, the story has taken on a life of its own, and when the local townspeople find a young woman's body they claim it is the missing girl and quickly bury her in their own cemetery, despite various signs indicating that it is not the same girl at all. Although these two stories are quite different in form, both reflect Jackson's interest in the social construction of reality: while the former insists on the mutability of historical knowledge, the latter underscores the equally real human desire to impose narrative order on a chaotic, indifferent, and possibly even hostile world.

Jackson's two most often anthologized SF stories, “One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts” (1955) and “The Omen” (1958), specifically reflect her interest in domestic fabulation.28 The first of these stories uses an old married couple to demonstrate the arbitrariness of moral order. “One Ordinary Day” follows a day in the life of Mr. John Philip Johnson, a seemingly “responsible and truthful and respectable man” who wanders through New York City doing small good deeds for people: babysitting a child while his mother supervises moving men, arranging a promising romance between two lonely young people, giving a homeless man lunch money, and feeding peanuts to stray dogs and hungry seagulls (299). In this respect Jackson's story begins on a relatively benign note, as Mr. Johnson attempts to create order and happiness in the obviously disordered and unhappy lives of everyone he meets.

In contrast, Mrs. Johnson spends her day engaged in small acts of chaos and nastiness. As she tells her husband upon his return home: “[I] went into a department store this morning and accused the woman next to me of shoplifting, and had the store detective pick her up.

28. “One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts” is one of Jackson's most anthologized stories, along with “The Lottery” and “The Demon Lover.” It has appeared in at least twelve anthologies including Anthony Boucher's The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction: Fifth Series, Judith Merril's SF: The Best of the Best, Terry Carr and Martin H. Greenberg's A Treasury of Modern Fantasy, and Lawrence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman Stewart's Just an Ordinary Day. “The Omen,” like many of Jackson's stories, has been republished in one genre-specific anthology and one author-specific collection: Boucher's The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction: Eighth Series and Hyman and Stewart's Just an Ordinary Day. For further information, see Charles N. Brown and William G. Contenedo’s The Locus Index to Science Fiction and Index to Science Fiction Anthologies and Collections.
Sent three dogs to the pound—*you* know, the usual thing” (304). This final aside seems to confirm what Jackson has hinted at throughout her story: that the Johnsons are not mere mortals but living embodiments of much larger cosmic forces. More specifically, they appear to embody the naturally opposed forces of good and evil in a perfectly balanced relationship that is as comfortable and predictable as that of an old married couple.

But Jackson invokes her readers’ faith in the certainty of moral order only to shatter it at the end of her story:

> “Fine,” said Mr. Johnson [after learning about his wife’s adventures].
> “But you do look tired. Want to change over tomorrow?”
> “I *would* like to,” she said. “I could do with a change.”
> “Right,” said Mr. Johnson, “What’s for dinner?”

Thus, Jackson asks readers to consider the unsettling possibility that good and evil might not be eternally balanced forces but arbitrarily constructed concepts. Moreover, she underscores the very banality of such concepts by equating the fantastic choice to do good or evil with the mundane choice of what to eat for dinner.

Jackson returns to her interest in shopping lists and the construction of reality in “The Omen.” After announcing her plan to buy presents for her family and herself one morning, Granny Williams constructs a list that seems purposely designed to obscure rather than aid her memory. At first, Granny’s abbreviations make a certain kind of sense: when her daughter asks for a specific kind of perfume, she writes down its name, “Carnation,” and when her son-in-law requests some El Signo cigars, she writes down their name in translation as “the sign.” But as Granny becomes confused about what other family members want, her abbreviations become increasingly arbitrary: her granddaughter’s clamoring for stuffed animals is reduced to “blue cat”; her grandson’s request for a walkie-talkie gets translated as “telephone”; and the dime-store jewelry she covets for herself becomes simply a “ring” (119–20). From the very outset of this domestic fabulation, Jackson reiterates the sentiment she has proposed elsewhere in her domestic comedies: that the relations of signifier to signified are tenuous at best.

This point is made all the more clear by the movement of the shopping list through the city. When Granny loses her list on the bus ride into town, both the list and the narrative focus of Jackson’s story shift to Edith Webster, a timid young woman torn between a tyrannical...
mother who does not want her to leave home and a loving but increasing frustrated boyfriend who wants her to marry him. Paralyzed by indecision, Edith prays for “somebody, something, somehow [to] show me the way, make up my mind for me, give me an omen” (122). After discovering Granny’s list on the bus and finding herself deposited in a strange part of town bereft of any “familiar sign,” Edith whimsically decides that the list is an omen that will guide her to her mother's home (124). Instead, it guides her toward a new home of her own. When Edith meets a man headed to his own wedding, replete with a carnation in his label, she is suddenly convinced that the flower is “the sign” that she should also get married. Accordingly, when she finds a restaurant with a blue cat on the front window and a telephone in the back, she promptly calls her boyfriend to accept his marriage proposal and secure for herself the final item on Granny’s list: a ring. The ease with which Edith uses the list to secure her heart’s desire underscores the ease with which signifiers may be detached from one set of referents and reattached to another.

Although readers might expect Edith’s gain to be Granny’s loss, Jackson refuses this kind of simple cosmic balancing. Instead, Granny’s shopping trip turns out to be just as successful without a list as it might have been with one. No one gets the presents they asked for, but they seem equally pleased with what they do receive: as Granny’s grandson “immediately” announces upon receiving a toy gun rather than the requested walkie-talkie, “this is what I wanted” (130). Without the concrete presence of Granny’s list, her family cheerfully rewrites the memory of their earlier desires to match the reality of the evening as it unfolds. Even when Granny’s son-in-law eyes his garishly colored tie rather “dubiously,” the problem seems more directly tied to Granny’s atrocious sense of aesthetics rather than to the randomness of the gift (130). As in “One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts,” Jackson gives her story one final twist. After asking readers to consider the possibility that order might sometimes derive from a highly arbitrary matching of signifiers to signifieds, she asks them to consider an even more fantastic possibility: that order might sometimes be achieved without reference to any referents whatsoever.

Jackson’s interest in the social construction of reality leads her to explore the limits of those epistemologies most prized by scientists and SF writers alike. Associated as they are with magic and superstition, omens appear to be diametrically opposed to rational, deductive modes of inquiry. And it does seem that the first part of Jackson’s
story prepares readers for the failure of magical thinking. For example, when Edith calls out for a sign to guide her, the narrator sternly warns that this is, “of course, a most dangerous way of thinking” (122). After Edith finds Granny’s list, the narrator predicts that Edith is about to learn her first lesson regarding omens: “that their requirements are usually much more difficult than they seem to be” (124). And yet the second half of the story belies the narrator’s warnings because Edith attains her heart’s desire without any major problems.

So why does Jackson’s narrator insist that omen reading is so dangerous? Perhaps because such reading reveals how rational ways of knowing the world might be transformed by individual desire. Almost immediately after the narrator’s warning against magical thinking, Jackson introduces a subplot that revolves around a contest held by Murrain Brothers’ Groceries on the opening day of their newest store. To win $100 worth of free groceries, contestants must decode a series of clues that will lead them to “Miss Murrain,” a young woman wearing a hat “the color of the bags in which Murrain Brothers pack their special coffee” (125). Thus the contest requires participants to make sense of the world around them by decoding clues, matching them to external phenomena, and verifying the relations between the two congruent modes of inquiry.

The contest begins well enough with all participants politely following the rules of the game, but desire for the grand prize soon leads them to abandon all pretenses of logic and civility. When a group of contestants spot Edith wearing a hat that matches the red of the Murrain Brothers’ coffee bags, they immediately assume she is Miss Murrain. Without bothering to ask her the designated follow-up questions, the contestants descend upon Edith as a mob and drag her to the grocery store despite her protests that they have the wrong woman. When they learn that someone else has already found the real Miss Murrain, they quickly turn against Edith. “You mean to say,” one particularly belligerent woman screams, “you mean to say you told me you were that girl and you aren’t?” (127) Like Edith, the contest participants engage in a mode of sign reading that is guided by personal desire. However, because they confuse interpretation with observation, they are left without a template for productive action when interpretation fails. As the physical threat to Edith indicates, in some cases omen reading truly is “a most dangerous way of thinking.”

Ultimately, “The Omen” serves as a narrative instantiation of what Jackson observed more prosaically elsewhere: that superstition and science are not so much opposed epistemologies as they are varia-
tions of the same “pattern superimposed precariously on the chaos of human development” (qtd. in Oppenheimer 125). If Edith’s subjective sign reading turns out to be more productive than the contest participants’ pseudo-objective deduction, it is because she acknowledges her own participation in the construction of reality. At the beginning of the story Edith admits that she wants to elope with her fiancé but that “the courage required to defy her mother was more than she could muster” (122). Of course, this is precisely why she needs an omen: to give her courage. Furthermore, when Edith receives her sign in the form of Granny’s shopping list, she treats it rather playfully, “smiling at herself, although not with so much amusement as she might have felt if this omen had not arrived exactly on schedule” (124). In the end, Jackson suggests that the construction of reality can be a joyous and liberating event when it is the product of a playful seriousness that is, as she puts it in the final lines of her story, an “amazing . . . charming . . . [and] positively sentimental” business (130).

**Conclusion: Revisiting Galactic Suburbia**

In this chapter I have examined the rise of women’s SF in relation to broader patterns of literary production in the first half of the twentieth century. Since its heyday in the “long domestic decade” stretching from the end of World War II in 1945 to the revival of feminism in the 1960s, the relative merits of women’s SF have been at times heatedly debated within the SF community. For some, this SF was nothing more than a disastrous attempt to tell stories about the social and sexual relations of today in what would surely be the otherwise new scientific and technological worlds of tomorrow. For others, it was a logical step in the evolution of SF as a socially engaged and aesthetically innovative literature. Either way, arguments both for and against postwar women’s SF rarely addressed the relations of this new SF to other kinds of women’s writing, implying, at best, that it sprung more or less fully formed from the minds of a few women who crossed over from the mid-century women’s slick magazine market to produce a new kind of speculative fiction.

As my case studies of Judith Merril, Alice Eleanor Jones, and Shirley Jackson suggest, postwar women’s SF is properly understood as a dynamic form of storytelling that emerged at the intersection of diverse popular and experimental literary forms. Although Judith
Merril is most often remembered for her editing and anthologizing activities, she was also one of the first contemporary authors to write women’s SF, and the stories she produced in this vein at the beginning of her career in the late 1940s and 1950s set the standards for this type of fiction. This new kind of SF did not emerge in a vacuum but engaged a century-long tradition of women’s speculative fiction. Like many feminist utopian and SF writers before her, Merril imagined that new sciences and technologies would create the conditions for more egalitarian sex and gender relations. However, she nuanced the work of her predecessors by exploring how men and women alike might confront—and, ultimately, overcome—the social and psychological difficulties attending the development of new scientific and social relations.

While Merril turned to the past for inspiration, authors like Alice Eleanor Jones looked to the present. In many ways, Jones seems to be the avatar of postwar women’s SF authorship as it is typically conceived: although she wrote five well-received SF stories at the beginning of her literary career in the 1950s, she devoted most of her efforts for the next decade and a half to the more popular (and lucrative) market of women’s magazine fiction. This does not mean, however, that either her women’s magazine or SF stories simply celebrated those “happy housewife heroines” that Betty Friedan condemned in *The Feminine Mystique*. Instead, Jones used a variation on the ideal women’s magazine story—the offbeat romance—to explore what she called “the dark side” of courtship, marriage, and motherhood. In doing so, she showed how sex and gender roles were produced by unspoken but widely accepted social arrangements. When Jones put the offbeat romance to work in science-fictional landscapes, this story type became a focusing lens through which to explore how new scientific and technological arrangements might also contribute to the devastating legacy of the feminine mystique and the reduction of women to decidedly unhappy housewife heroines.

Popular women’s writing traditions may have provided both the political and poetic inspiration for a good deal of domestic SF, but they were by no means the only ones informing this kind of fiction. Authors such as Shirley Jackson also used the proto-postmodern literary form of structural fabulation to explore the mutability of moral and intellectual order and the social construction of reality. Although this wildly popular author published just five stories in SF magazines over the course of her long career, she is increasingly considered to be, like her male counterparts Walter Miller, Theodore Sturgeon, and
Kurt Vonnegut, an important example of those “borderline” authors whose work blurs the boundaries between structural fabulation and SF. She is also an important member of that group of SF authors including Merril and Jones who used the conventionally feminine tropes of marriage, domesticity, and the home as microcosms through which to explore larger social and intellectual concerns; accordingly, her stories are best understood as “domestic fabulations.” And Jackson's domestic fabulations are particularly interesting because they demonstrate the convergence between protofeminist and proto-postmodern concerns, including a deep suspicion of master narratives and overly rational ways of knowing the world, especially as they are expressed in dominant scientific (and science-fictional) discourses.

Taken together, these case studies of three very different postwar women writers demonstrate that the rise of women's SF was less of an anomaly than it might at first seem. And yet, although this kind of mapping activity provides us with some insight into the basic thematic concerns and narrative techniques of women's SF, it also raises at least two other pressing questions: Why would women writers choose to conduct their political and aesthetic experiments in the realm of SF, an increasingly popular but still relatively marginal literary form in the postwar era? And why make seemingly conventional—if not explicitly conservative—domestic tropes central to these experiments, especially in an era of feminist backlash when such tropes were most often used to glorify the gendered status quo? As we shall see in the following chapters, these choices actually made a great deal of sense because they enabled women writers to engage in debates over some of the most pressing political and cultural issues of the day—including debates over the nature of women's work in the home itself.