

# Genre Hybridisation in the Feminist Short Stories of Margo Lanagan & *Synchronisation*

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## Declaration of partial fulfilment and originality

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Research at Macquarie University. This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)\_\_\_\_\_

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Date: 17<sup>th</sup> December 2020

## Abstract

This thesis explores how Margo Lanagan employs multiple genre conventions and tropes to create fictional worlds and new narrative discourses around issues of feminism, historical representation, national identities in her short fiction. It is comprised of research and a creative component. The creative component will implement the techniques and genres explored in the discussion of Lanagan's short stories.

Margo Lanagan is an Australian author whose fiction blends genres and appeals to both young adults and adults. Several scholarly essays have focused on her young adult novels; however, her short fiction has not received the same attention. This paper aims to begin closing this gap by examining Lanagan's short stories, with a specific focus on how Lanagan manipulates multiple genre conventions to create narratives that resist easy genre classification. While the scholarship of science fiction and fantasy texts creates a false dichotomy between the modes, writers often combine genres, and sub-genres, from either side of this divide. Lanagan's stories exemplify this trend as they all bridge science fiction and fantasy. In order to discuss these texts then, one must draw from both sides of the existing scholarship. Lanagan is a consciously feminist writer, and this is an aspect of the analysis of these narratives. It is fruitful to combine research approaches in order to explore the full breadth of Lanagan's creative expression.

This thesis examines a selection of Lanagan's short fiction using close reading in combination with feminist theory and genre theory. These narratives build complex secondary worlds while also engaging with contemporary issues through their plots and characters. Through this investigation, this thesis will show how Lanagan manipulates genre at a textual level and what effect that manipulation has on how the narrative engages with social issues. This thesis's research is accompanied by a creative work titled "Synchronisation" and a short reflective essay discussing the interaction between the research and the creative process.

## Acknowledgements

My great appreciation goes first to Dr Jane Messer for her thoughtful and robust supervision throughout this project. It has been a challenging year for many reasons, and while our contact wasn't always in the form we would have liked, Jane always offered insightful advice to guide my development as a researcher and as a writer.

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Finally, my most heartfelt thanks go to my family. My parents and in-laws, who all watched this process and supported me, even from a distance. I am most grateful for my husband, Michael, who, even though he didn't always understand the journey, encouraged me to persevere and learn. It wouldn't be nearly as easy to see through the dark times without you by my side.

## Covid-19 Impact Statement

Dear Examiner,

Many of our HDR candidates have had to make changes to their research due to the impact of COVID-19. Below you will find a statement from the candidate, approved by their Supervisory Panel, that indicates how their original research plan has been affected by COVID-19 restrictions. Relevant ongoing restrictions in place caused by COVID-19 will also be detailed by the candidate.

Candidate's Statement:

Thesis Title: Genre Hybridisation in the Feminist Short Stories of Margo Lanagan

Candidate Name: Sheriden Goldie

Department: English

Statement:

As a result of the lock-downs associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, I was unable to access physical resources from the library for some time. Due to precautions undertaken by the university library, interlibrary loans were unavailable, and new books that were requested to be purchased were delayed or unfulfilled. This means that I have accessed some of my primary sources through digital copies, or through print editions that I have access to that are not their original iteration. As I live in a household with family members who were in higher-risk age groups, I postponed my return to the campus beyond official reopening. I also prioritised sources that I could access digitally in order to reduce the risk of exposure to my family and me

While most digital resources I have accessed are PDF files or scans that replicate their physical equivalents, some are digital-originating resources, such as eBooks obtained through Amazon Kindle. I have used the Kindle location indicator when page numbers are not provided in these instances where I quote or reference digital-originating texts. These indicate the location of the quoted text; However, this may vary between devices.



## Genre Hybridisation in the Feminist Short Stories of Margo Lanagan



## Introduction and Orientation

There is a difference between how scholars discuss genre and how authors manipulate genre for their narrative purposes. By treating science fiction and fantasy as two distinct genres, scholars create a false dichotomy between them. The way writers use genre is out-pacing the scholarship, and new approaches need to be explored if we are to engage with new literature in ways that are productive and responsive to the social, cultural, and imaginative forces that permeate contemporary genre fiction. There are multiple levels of engagement with science fiction and fantasy texts; readers and fans, writers, popular criticism, and scholarly criticism. At each level of remove from academic scholarship, the need for defining the genre, its position in relation to the literary canon, and its usefulness to society, becomes less important. However, at the same time, these are some of the key questions' scholars ask of popular genres in attempts to justify their research.

Both science fiction and fantasy scholarship tend to address each genre separately. For example, the works of Tvetzan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, Kathryn Hume, and Ann Swinfen focus on fantasy,<sup>1</sup> while Darko Suvin, Brian W. Aldiss, David Seed, Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin focus on science fiction.<sup>2</sup> The Cambridge Companion to Literature series has separate volumes for science fiction and fantasy, although it is interesting to note that each volume shares the same editors: Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James.<sup>3</sup> This indicates, at the very least, that scholars have overlapping interests in both fantasy and science fiction,

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<sup>1</sup> See: Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*. Jackson, *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion*. Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy*. Todorov, *The Fantastic*.

<sup>2</sup> See: Aldiss and Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. Scholes and Rabkin, *Science Fiction: History. Science. Vision*. Seed, *A Companion to Science Fiction*. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*.

<sup>3</sup> See: James and Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Mendlesohn and James, *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*.

whether they principally work across both genres or not. Science fiction scholarship also tends to take either a historical approach, plotting the evolution of a genre over time (See work as mentioned earlier by Aldiss, also Adam Roberts),<sup>4</sup> or it takes a socio-political view, examining selected texts for how they engage with and represent other theoretical frameworks - such as feminism, postcolonialism, Marxism, or combinations of these.<sup>5</sup> Fantasy scholarship, also explores its links with history, but through the use of historical motifs in fantasy.<sup>6</sup> Fantasy scholarship often focuses on key example texts,<sup>7</sup> a primary focus being the use of fantasy in children's literature.<sup>8</sup>

So far, the trajectory of science fiction and fantasy scholarship has been to separate these genres, but hybrid genre studies are beginning to bridge this gap. There is a growing body of literature, which is due to the many combinations of thematic or formal genres being explored by writers and creators. Hybrid fiction studies that engage with science fiction or fantasy explore the links between genre fiction and other literary tropes or mediums, for example, war and fantasy in films,<sup>9</sup> or science fiction and film noir,<sup>10</sup> however they seem not to explore the hybrid relation between science fiction and fantasy in literature specifically beyond space operas.<sup>11</sup>

I aim to bring together science fiction and fantasy scholarship, moving beyond the binary, dichotomous approach of the existing scholarship outlined above, in ways that will be productive for discussing Margo Lanagan's genre-hybridising work. In my study of a selection of short stories by Lanagan, I will add to the growing body of hybrid genre studies and add to the evolution of science fiction and fantasy studies. Reading key examples of Lanagan's fiction as representing her pervasive practice of manipulating multiple genres, I

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<sup>4</sup> Roberts, 'The History of Science Fiction'. In *Science Fiction*.

<sup>5</sup> See: Hollinger, '(Re)Reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender'. Russ, 'The Image of Women in Science Fiction'. Yaszek, 'Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future'.

<sup>6</sup> See: Elliott, 'Strangely Interested: The Work of Historical Fantasy'. Schanoes, 'Historical Fantasy'. Tolmie, 'Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine'. Yaszek, "'A Grim Fantasy': Remaking American History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*'.

<sup>7</sup> See: James, 'Tolkien, Lewis and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy'. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*.

<sup>8</sup> See: O'Keefe, *Readers in Wonderland*. Pavlik, 'Being There: The Spatiality of 'Other World' Fantasy Fiction'. Hunt and Lenz, *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*.

<sup>9</sup> See: Selbo, 'The Fantasy and War Genres'.

<sup>10</sup> See: Meehan, *Tech-Noir: The Fusion of Science Fiction and Film Noir*.

<sup>11</sup> See: Cupitt, 'Space Opera A Hybrid Form of Science Fiction and Fantasy'.

Space Operas are a subgenre of science fiction that derived from American westerns, employing outer space as metaphor for the pioneering frontier. See the entry by Brian Stableford and David Langford in The Science Fiction Encyclopedia for further information: [http://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/space\\_opera](http://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/space_opera)

will develop a discussion on the way writers employ genre tropes as 'cues' and blend these genre tropes in ways to create narratives that both conform to and subvert reader expectations.

## Margo Lanagan: Australian author of hybrid genre fiction

I am interrogating Margo Lanagan's short fiction to explore how she manipulates genre, tropes, and conventions to create narratives that both conform to and challenge reader expectations. Margo Lanagan is an Australian author who has written novels and short fiction for young adults (YA), though her work appeals to adults as well. Some of her novels have received critical scholarly attention, focusing on their themes of death, trauma, suicide, and sexuality. Due to her works also crossing age genres, being read by teens and adults, the intensity of these themes in Lanagan's novels has been the focus of a number of scholarly articles.<sup>12</sup> Her treatment of 'gritty' themes in YA novels leads scholars to debate her work for its mimetic qualities and explore what impact her work might have on young readers. Her short stories, however, have not received the same level of scholarly attention. Even though Lanagan has written several short stories that reimagine fairy tales, only her novels *Tender Morsels* and *Sea Hearts* were included in Danielle Wood's study of Australian fairy tale retellings.<sup>13</sup> Boehm's essay "Crossover fiction and the adolescent economy of writing in the works of Margo Lanagan" examines Lanagan's fiction, including two of her earlier short story collections, *Yellowcake* and *Red Spikes*.<sup>14</sup> The focus of Boehm's study, though, is the age crossing appeal of Lanagan's work and her way of engaging with and reflecting on coming of age and adolescence.

This thesis addresses this significant gap by focusing on Lanagan's short fiction. I will discuss a selection of Lanagan's short fiction in order to show how Lanagan manipulates multiple genres. This will show that her practice of manipulating genres, hybridising, and blending them is a practice that pervades her work. Lanagan is not alone in this practice, and her work adds to a long history of genre manipulation and subversion by the likes of Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, Margaret Atwood, Neil Gaiman, Nalo Hopkinson, China

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<sup>12</sup> See works by Boehm, Harris, James, and Wood.

<sup>13</sup> Wood, 'Renegotiating "Once Upon a Time"'

<sup>14</sup> Boehm, 'Crossover Fiction and the Adolescent Economy of Writing in the Works of Margo Lanagan'

Mieville, and Ken Liu. I am choosing to focus on Lanagan's short fiction because these texts, which reflect localised Australian histories and national sensibilities, are radical within a genre that is universalising primarily to American norms.

Due to the large size of Lanagan's body of short fictions, which include seventy-four short stories and novellas<sup>15</sup> and a chapbook of fifty prose poems<sup>16</sup>, there are many stories that I am unable to cover. I have set aside her fairy-tale and folk tale retellings which currently total eleven short stories, and would benefit from their own dedicated study.<sup>17</sup> She has also produced a small group of narratives that utilise animal or non-human protagonists.<sup>18</sup> These challenge reader's expectations through defamiliarisation and revelation, and they would also benefit from separate examination. I have chosen to focus on a handful of stories that evidence the hybridisation of science fiction and fantasy common to her work. This hybrid genre is sometimes described as 'science fantasy.' In the examples I have chosen, even the use of this existing term science fantasy is insufficient; however, to describe the complex ways the genres are set in relation to each other. For this reason, I turn to a broader and more varied body of scholarship on hybrid genre practises to inform this research.

## Science Fiction and Fantasy Scholarship

While science fiction and fantasy are often grouped together in popular discourse, the scholarship has often defined science fiction and fantasy in opposition to each other. In their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn point out that Tvetzan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, Kathryn Hume, W.R. Irwin and Colin Manlove "all agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible."<sup>19</sup> However, James and Mendlesohn note that after this cursory definition, these

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<sup>15</sup> These are published in magazines, (Overland, Meanjin, Lightspeed, Nightmare Magazine, Foundation), and edited anthologies, as well as in her short fiction collections; *White Time*, *Black Juice*, *Red Spikes*, *Yellowcake*, *Cracklespace*, *Phantom Limbs*.

<sup>16</sup> *Stray Bats*, 2019

<sup>17</sup> These stories are: "Daughter of Clay," "Forever Upward," "Winkie," (*Red Spikes*, 2006). "Ferryman," "The Golden Shroud," (*Yellowcake*, 2009). "When I Lay Frozen" (*The Starlit Wood: New Fairy Tales*, edited by Johnathan Strahan, 2016). "Not All Ogre," (*Singing My Sister Down and Other Stories*, 2017). "A Pig's Whisper," "Black Swan Event," "The Goosle," "Titty Anne and the Very, Very Hairy Man," (*Phantom Limbs*, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> These stories are: "The Queen's Notice," (*White Time*, 2000). "Sweet Pippit," (*Black Juice*, 2004). "Monkey's Paternoster," (*Red Spikes*, 2006). "Eyelids of the Dawn," (*Yellowcake*, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> James and Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. 1

theorists often diverge, “each to generate definitions of fantasy which include the texts that they value and exclude most of what general readers think of as fantasy.”<sup>20</sup> For readers, editors and those directly involved in the marketing and selling of genre fiction, this opposing relationship often creates more problems. Gary K. Wolfe, a science fiction and fantasy scholar, and Jonathan Strahan, an esteemed editor of science fiction and fantasy books, discuss the implications of changing a combined science fiction and fantasy anthology to an exclusively science fiction anthology.<sup>21</sup> Strahan’s stance was that even if he had to build a ‘wall’ between the genres, his would be ‘porous’ and allow movement between the two sides. This permeable way of working with the genre overlap is an example of how the differences are reconciled in popular discourse. However, this kind of gloss has not been applied to academic scholarship, as it is seen to lack rigour.

The definition of science fiction has evolved over time. In 1979 Darko Suvin used Bertolt Brecht’s ‘estrangement’ as a key part of his definition of science fiction, that it is the representation of a subject that is at once familiar and unfamiliar.<sup>22</sup> This and Suvin’s other concept, the ‘novum,’ became key terms in defining science fiction literature. The ‘novum,’ the new idea, gadget, or concept, is what determines if a text is science fiction, or not.<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, some scholars argue that the ‘sense of wonder’ is the heart of science fiction. Edwards and Mendlesohn argue this point in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*,<sup>24</sup> but they describe this wonder as a response to the “creation of a new invention, or an arrival in a new place,”<sup>25</sup> linking ‘wonder’ to Suvin’s ‘novum.’ Brian Aldiss, both a writer of science fiction and scholar, considered ways to bridge popular and scholarly definitions, defining science fiction as “the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science).”<sup>26</sup> In this definition, we find some of the core philosophical concerns of modern literary science fiction. Aldiss also goes on to begin linking science fiction and fantasy: “It is often impossible to separate science fiction from science fantasy, or either from fantasy,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 1

<sup>21</sup> Strahan and Wolfe, ‘Science Fiction, Open Borders, and Porous Boundaries.’

<sup>22</sup> Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. 6-7

<sup>23</sup> See Roberts, *Science Fiction*. 7, Shippey, ‘Hard Reading: The Challenges of Science Fiction’. 14, Rieder, ‘On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History’. 193.

<sup>24</sup> Mendlesohn and James, *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. 3

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>26</sup> Aldiss and Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. 25

since both modes are part of fantasy in a general sense... Thus science assimilates fantasy. Fantasy is almost as avid in assimilating science.”<sup>27</sup> Aldiss is describing the shifts in ways genre conventions are identified in texts, and he is pointing to the very liberal borrowing from each to experiment with and create fiction

The evolution of fantasy scholarship has been complicated by the delineation of the fantastic as a mode of expression and fantasy as a genre. Tsvetan Todorov identified ‘hesitation’ as the key feature of the fantastic as mode, stating that it “is defined by the reader’s ambiguous perception of the events narrated.”<sup>28</sup> Rosemary Jackson built on Todorov’s definition, stating that the fantastic “characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.”<sup>29</sup> Todorov’s and Jackson’s definitions were influential to fantasy scholarship, as they generated new interest in developing the field of study and gave fantasy scholarship some ‘clout’ because their studies were published and recognised within literary and academic fields. However, Todorov’s and Jackson’s definitions are no longer sufficient for incorporating contemporary iterations of fantasy as a genre, as the genre has evolved beyond the types of texts included in these early studies. More recently, in defining fantasy as a genre, Ann Swinfen claimed that the “essential ingredient of all fantasy is ‘the marvellous’, which will be regarded as anything outside the normal space-time continuum of the everyday world.”<sup>30</sup> Kathryn Hume resists defining fantasy as a genre or a mode in her book, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, stating instead that the impulse to fantasy as a way of expression is not separable from other genres of literature, that it is “rather an impulse as significant as the mimetic impulse, and to recognise that both are involved in the creation of most literature.”<sup>31</sup> Hume does clarify, and conforms to prevailing fantasy genre definitions, by defining fantasy as “the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal.”<sup>32</sup>

It is possible to draw, from the previous discussion, a summary of the scholarly definitions: science fiction is an extrapolation from the present, an exploration of current

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 26

<sup>28</sup> Todorov, *The Fantastic*. 31

<sup>29</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion*. 3

<sup>30</sup> Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy*. 5

<sup>31</sup> Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*. xii

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. xii

knowledge and thinking, and stretching it to other potentials; fantasy is defined by its creation of worlds and characters that do not conform to our reality. This tension between science fiction and fantasy is what makes combinations of these modes so potentially fruitful for scholars in exploring how texts can create rich, diverse, and interesting imaginary worlds, using conventions, but at the same time creating narratives that feel innovative and new.

Defining a genre is, at best, a contradictory undertaking. David Duff states, “In modern literary theory, few concepts have proved more problematic and unstable than that of genre.”<sup>33</sup> By defining a form, judgements are inherently made about what is included and excluded. This makes the process of defining a genre, and any kind of hybrid genre or genre blends, inherently political. By political, I mean that there is a discrepancy in who is making claims to inclusion or exclusion from genre definitions, and those that create the works being assessed. It is important to acknowledge the conscious and unconscious biases that have shaped the canonised science fiction and fantasy literature. The predominance of white male anglophone authors, especially as the focus of scholarly attention, highlights a need to grapple with these biases. In recent years there has been a shift amongst science fiction and fantasy publishers to publish a wider range of texts, from authors of different gender identities, national backgrounds<sup>34</sup>, and works in translations.<sup>35</sup> Gary K. Wolfe makes this point in reviewing the 2020 edition of *The Year’s Best Science Fiction: Volume 1* edited by Jonathan Strahan:

“Strahan’s new volume includes writers from India, the Caribbean, Lebanon, Sweden, China, Spain, Nigeria, Canada, and Australia, all adding up to more than 40% of the selections. This doesn’t mean that Dozois was blind to SF’s multiculturalism (his later volumes increasingly reflected diversity), but simply that SF can no longer be viewed as a predominantly Anglo-American project, and – perhaps just as important – stories from a wide variety of cultures are far more available than they were just a few years ago.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Duff, *Modern Genre Theory*. 1

<sup>34</sup> While there are numerous individual novelists who demonstrate this, these are some science fiction and fantasy anthologies that demonstrate this are: Mamatas and Washington, *The Future Is Japanese*. Murray, Dhar, and Roy, *Eat the Sky, Drink the Ocean*. Rafael and Roberts, *Mother of Invention*. Talabi, *AFRICANFUTURISM: An Anthology*.

<sup>35</sup> Most notably Ken Liu translated Liu Cixin’s *Three Body Problem* trilogy, bringing the exemplary texts to English speaking readers. See: Alter, ‘How Chinese Sci-Fi Conquered America (Published 2019)’.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfe, ‘Gary K. Wolfe Reviews The Year’s Best Science Fiction’.

Wolfe is comparing Strahan's edited collection to the previous anthologies by acclaimed editor in the field, Gardner Dozois. Dozois first edited a collection of science fiction and fantasy in 1984 - "That volume, like the several that immediately followed it, was essentially an anthology of American stories, with a smattering of British or Canadian writers."<sup>37</sup> In showcasing the diversity that Strahan's anthology has achieved, Wolfe is signalling the collective shift in science fiction and fantasy publishing. The key facet of science fiction and fantasy Wolfe is pointing to, and he includes horror in this as well, is that these genres "have been unstable literary isotopes virtually since their evolution into identifiable narrative modes—or at least into identifiable market categories—a process that began a century or more ago and is still going."<sup>38</sup> The problem is that genre scholarship lags behind the texts being produced and instead becomes homogeneous and exclusionary of any deviation from the canonised themes and motifs, or social and cultural norms, of what a genre author 'looks like.' Wolfe's introduction to his essay collection notes, "What these essays are really mourning, upon closer inspection, is the declining market health of that self-invented and self-reflexive genre."<sup>39</sup> It is necessary to closely examine these tendencies and work to expand scholarly perspectives enabling growth and evolution in a way that reflects the creative work being done with that genre.

The term 'speculative fiction' has been peripheral to the debate about science fiction and fantasy genre definitions. It also generates heated discussions between scholars, authors and readers. The use of the word 'speculative' in relation to science fiction began in 1947 when Robert A. Heinlein<sup>40</sup> used both 'science fiction' and 'speculative fiction' in his influential essay, "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction." He uses the term 'science fiction' to refer to his own fiction and uses the term 'speculative' to illustrate his views about what science fiction should do, that is, to speculate on unknown situations and times.<sup>41</sup> In her 1966 essay "What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?" Judith Merrill expands on Heinlein's ideas, using the term to describe the "essence" of science fiction; these speculative stories would "explore... discover... learn, by means of projection," something of reality, they would

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres*. Kindle Page 3

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Kindle Page 35

<sup>40</sup> Heinlein is a key figure of early pulp science fiction, being a frequent contributor to *Astounding*, from the late 30s to 40s. His influence and career continued through the 50s, 60s, and 70s. (Clute, *Encyclopedia*)

<sup>41</sup> Heinlein, 'On the Writing of Speculative Fiction.' 17

discover something about the nature of man.<sup>42</sup> The term became popular, and speculative fiction has been used to describe the works of Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin, Ian McEwan, Neil Gaiman, and China Mieville. Some authors reject the label (Ian McEwan)<sup>43</sup>, while others embrace it (Margaret Atwood)<sup>44</sup>, and some dispute its popular usage (Ursula K. Le Guin).<sup>45</sup> In contrast, some scholars have claimed it is an all-encompassing genre term, with science fiction, fantasy, horror, and their subgenres all collectively making up the speculative fiction genre.<sup>46</sup> However, this claim, of science fiction and fantasy being subgenres of a larger speculative fiction genre, comes from scholars viewing the genres from external perspectives and are published in journals of literature or cultural studies, not those dedicated to the study of science fiction or fantasy literature. It could be argued that to discredit these contributions is a form of disciplinary gate-keeping. However, I believe that these contributions do more to confuse the conceptualisation of these genres, than clarify them.

The way the term 'speculative' is used in scholarship is once again at variance with how it is used in popular discourse. The term 'speculative' still carries valence in popular circles, allowing readers to describe the qualities they look for in a certain kind of fiction. It has gained credence as the world has advanced technologically and socially, and so the concepts that were once considered plausible in science fiction have been surpassed, and the way authors imagine the future are being influenced by the way the world reads science fiction (whether for good or ill) as prophecy.<sup>47</sup> Readers and writers are more aware of the fallacy of trying to predict the direction science and technology will take us, with some outlandish inventions coming true, while others that seemed a given, languish in our collective imaginations. So, while the term 'speculative' is useful for describing what particular kinds of genre fiction do, as a 'genre', it does not add clarity to the discussion of fantasy and science fiction, and for this reason, I only use it as a descriptor.

An aside needs to be made here to the concept of 'slipstream fiction.' This is a term that, like 'speculative fiction', has been used to incorporate those texts which operate at the

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<sup>42</sup> Merrill, 'What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?' 27

<sup>43</sup> Dittum, "'It Drives Writers Mad': Why Are Authors Still Sniffy about Sci-Fi?"

<sup>44</sup> Mancuso, 'Speculative or Science Fiction?' n.p.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. n.p.

<sup>46</sup> See: Macrae, 'Alternative Worlds'. Gill, 'The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction'.

<sup>47</sup> Eveleth, 'Can Sci-Fi Writers Prepare Us for an Uncertain Future?'

edges of genre conventions and potentially blur with literary fiction in their tone and contents. The image of the term is physical, “a ship or an airplane (either of which stands for genre sf) can create a slipstream which may be strong enough to give non-paying passengers... a ride.”<sup>48</sup> From outside genre scholarship, Ryan Britt notes that “Talking about slipstream is a good step to bringing out biases shared by readers and critics on all sides,”<sup>49</sup> in this way, he is aligning with much of the scholarship around hybrid genre scholarship. However, like the term ‘speculative,’ ‘slipstream’ adds to the diffusion of genre texts, a spreading out rather than a coalescing. This is relevant to the issues facing scholarship of keeping up with contemporary texts. Contemporary scholars are working around the contention of terminology by shifting the discussion of these issues away from terminology and genre definition: “Rather, I see slipstream as not so much a body of texts sharing certain narrative parameters but, rather, as a discourse that is reflective of sf’s internal politics as well as of its changing status in the larger literary landscape.”<sup>50</sup> It is difficult to discuss a text as an example of a new genre, or mode, without dismissing the many other genres that have informed its production.

My decision to not use ‘speculative fiction’ as a genre term is closely linked to my previous discussion of the political implications of genre categorisation. As Jessica McDonald discusses in relation to Nalo Hopkinson’s work and the act of setting texts outside the genre bounds as political othering,<sup>51</sup> by including Margo Lanagan’s work where science fiction and fantasy converge, rather than pushing it outside either, or into a separate genre, I aim to integrate a perspective that has not been central to that of the canons of both science fiction and fantasy. By positioning Lanagan’s fiction as a complex blend of both genres, these texts can bridge the two polarities, occupying the liminal space between the two. Contemporary writers are increasingly manipulating genre, and so it seems only prudent to develop the scholarship that addresses their blended use of genres to enable comprehensive genre scholarship.

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<sup>48</sup> Clute, ‘Slipstream’. n.p.

<sup>49</sup> Britt, ‘Oh, Slippery Slipstream’. n.p.

<sup>50</sup> Pawel, ‘Of Slipstream and Others: SF and Genre Boundary Discourses’. 21

<sup>51</sup> McDonald, ‘Beyond Generic Hybridity: Nalo Hopkinson and the Politics of Science Fiction’.

## Hybrid Genre Scholarship

The term 'hybrid' and 'hybridisation' is used across many disciplines to describe the combination of disparate things into new forms, and yet even when restricted to the field of literary study, it can still be unwieldy. David Duff defines 'hybridisation' as a "process by which two or more genres combine to form a new genre or subgenre; or by which elements of two or more genres are combined in a single work."<sup>52</sup> While this has become a prevailing definition, it has been contested. Martina Allen claims this definition is "both inadequate for a fruitful interpretation of innovative uses of generic forms, and misleading as to the functions and effects of genre."<sup>53</sup> She argues that the term does not describe nor imply the breadth of creative use and effect of combining genres; however, the term does not need to do this. The term 'hybrid' casts a wide net; it can be applied to any combination of genres that might come into existence. It can be applied to formal blending and thematic combinations, further broadening the field. For these reasons, the existing body of hybrid genre scholarship can seem scattered and unfocused - but surely this has been the case with any newly evolving area of scholarship. In my earlier discussion of fantasy scholarship, the earliest studies are acknowledged but usually set aside, as their arguments do not form a cohesion that is useful to apply to newer texts. This is a useful way to consider early studies into hybridisation in literary genres. Allen's criticism of hybrid theory is primarily built on the imperfect transfer of a scientific genetic concept to literary and cultural studies. But surely it is expected that concepts will vary when being transposed from one discipline to another? This is certainly the case in the evolving usage of genre cues outside their original genre. For example, the conventions of time travel are not used the same way as they are in science fiction as in fantasy texts. (I will be discussing this some more later in relation to Margo Lanagan's short stories.) Allen's point is that the exactitude of science cannot be replicated, leading to a focus on the way's texts are hybrid, rather than what effect it has on how the text is experienced. She suggests using the term 'generic blending'<sup>54</sup> instead to allow for more flexibility in discussing the effect of genres in combination. Like McDonald, Allen

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<sup>52</sup> Duff, *Modern Genre Theory*. xiv

<sup>53</sup> Allen, 'Against "Hybridity" in Genre Studies: Blending as an Alternative Approach to Generic Experimentation'. 4

<sup>54</sup> Allen, 'Against "Hybridity" in Genre Studies: Blending as an Alternative Approach to Generic Experimentation'. 3

argues that “the ascription of a fundamental, even ‘natural’, difference between two genres... neglects both the diversity and adaptability of genre usage.”<sup>55</sup>

I have chosen to continue using the term ‘hybrid’ to describe the combination of genres that I discuss in relation to Margo Lanagan’s work, as it has persisted in the scholarly discourse. However, the key drivers of my argument are to discuss the effect this manipulation of genre has and how this hybridisation complicates the text's relationship with prevailing conceptions of genre and its canon. This complication diversifies the discussion around science fiction and fantasy texts, causing the scholarship to develop new ways of discussing genre. It is this development that is essential for allowing new texts to be examined in ways that are productive and responsive to their creation.

Hybrid genre approaches to literary texts are prevalent in postcolonial scholarship’s examination of the ways fiction engages with race, colonialism, and identity. There have been several studies on the relationship between science fiction and postcolonialism, and this is developing further with the coalescing of new subgenres, such as Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism and Afrofantasy are terms used to describe texts that use science fiction and fantasy conventions, styles or modes, and incorporate characters, motifs, and references from the various African diaspora.<sup>56</sup> This is an exciting area of scholarship and fiction as McDonald, quoting Marleen Barr, notes, “science fictions reliance on Western notions of reason and knowledge... ‘perpetuates the exclusion of fantasy, women, and people of colour.’”<sup>57</sup>

The postcolonial lens has generated a scepticism in relation to history and narrative. This scepticism combines with hybrid genre studies well because postcolonial and hybrid genre discourse both challenge the prevailing norms, structures and systems that prioritise some texts, bodies, or histories, and exclude or ignore others. There is a significant amount of scholarship engaging with science fiction and postcolonialism;<sup>58</sup> however, there is markedly

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>56</sup> Authors working in and around these genres include, Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, Marlon James, N. K. Jemisin, and Colson Whitehead. While some authors do lean more on science fiction or fantasy it is not pertinent to my discussion at this time. For an overview of Afrofuturism see Yaszek, ‘Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future’.

<sup>57</sup> Barr, “‘All At One Point’ Conveys the Point, Period: Or, Black Science Fiction Is Bursting Out All Over.’ xv, quoted in McDonald, ‘Beyond Generic Hybridity: Nalo Hopkinson and the Politics of Science Fiction’. 134

<sup>58</sup> See Langer, *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*. Kerslake, *Science Fiction & Empire*. Raja, Ellis, and Nandi, *The Postnational Fantasy: Essays on Postcolonialism, Cosmopolitics and Science Fiction*.

less that engages with fantasy or its subgenres. While this is an area that is too large for me to address within the scope of this thesis, it is an area that is of significance to the work of Margo Lanagan and other Australian authors who prioritise national sensibilities within literary markets that tend toward universalising and homogenising norms.

Even though hybrid genre scholarship, especially in relation to science fiction and fantasy, is still developing, it is a pertinent framework to apply to contemporary texts that challenge genre classification, tropes, and conventions. Margo Lanagan is an author who has been underrepresented in the scholarship, and by using her short fiction to evidence the trend towards genre manipulation and hybridisation, I will add a new perspective to the study of her work. Throughout this thesis, I will demonstrate how hybrid genre examinations develop different ways of understanding a text, its construction, and its impact.



## Margo Lanagan's short fiction: An examination of genre hybridisation in action

Margo Lanagan is an Australian author who is highly regarded within the fields of science fiction and fantasy and as a literary writer. Lanagan has won numerous awards for her fiction. "Singing My Sister Down" is a crucial story within Lanagan's body of work. It was published in her second collection of short fiction *Black Juice* and won the Aurealis award for best young adult short story, and the Golden Aurealis for short story in 2004.<sup>59</sup> The many awards and accolades Lanagan has achieved, evidence that Lanagan is regarded as a skilled and imaginative author, however they are unable to show how and why she is regarded in this way.

Lanagan is a consciously feminist author, and her short fiction demonstrates this through subversion of gender roles and norms, as well as challenging the kinds of narratives she uses science fiction and fantasy conventions to explore. In this way, Lanagan is exploring one of the arguments Joanna Russ makes in her essay "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," that the story arcs, or 'myths,' that a male character can enact and find success in, would invariably mean failure for a female character.<sup>60</sup> Lanagan's narratives interrogate archetypal characters, such as the hero called to adventure and the time traveller. These archetypes are often displaced from their everyday settings and placed in genre settings that do not align with the archetype. This is most relevant when these figures are also gender inversions, such as a boy becoming midwife or a woman becoming an

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<sup>59</sup> The Aurealis Awards were established by Chimera Publications, who also publish the Australian speculative fiction magazine *Aurealis*, to recognise the achievements of Australian science fiction, fantasy and horror writers. The award was established in 1995. The Golden Aurealis is a 'best-in-show' style award, drawing on all categories.

<https://aurealisawards.org/about/>

<sup>60</sup> Russ, *To Write Like a Woman*. 83

engineer. Lanagan challenges gender representation in narratives in ways that connect with and challenge societal norms.

In the following sections, I will discuss this in relation to a selection of Lanagan's short stories and show how they blend genres in various ways to achieve these effects. I begin with a discussion of the way Lanagan draws on specific conventions of time travel, time slips, parallel worlds, and alternate dimensions across genres. In "White Time", the conventions of Time Travel are adjacent to the main plot of the narrative, challenging the use of science fictional or fantastic tropes as primary narrative devices. "Big Rage" employs the recognisable trope of a wild, unknown and primal parallel world to our 'civilised' contemporary setting. However, instead of our recognisable contemporary character seeking out or being transported to the parallel world, the protagonist's world is disrupted by an interloper from the parallel world. In "Baby Jane," a boy becomes a midwife to a dimensional-rift travelling warrior queen, challenging the conventions of the male-protagonist led adventure, and by extension, the *Bildungsroman*. "The Proving of Smollet Standforth," despite beginning in ways that conform to fantasy conventions, spins the ghost into a science fiction trope of a time traveller, allowing the youth to transition to adulthood through his immersion and return to the domestic space, rather than an outward journey through the physical world.

Fantasy fiction often employs a pseudo-medieval pastness to create story worlds. Through this usage, fantasy has become loosely affiliated with history, with historical motifs functioning as indicators of genre. In "Tin Pocket" and "An Honest Day's Work", Lanagan draws on history as inspiration but draws away from pseudo-medieval aspects of fantasy fiction. The protagonists in both these short stories are challenged to find their own personal way of reconciling with their world after strange and unexpected events transpire. In "Tin Pocket", a husband must reconcile an impossible encounter with an object which comes alive, and in "An Honest Day's Work", a disabled boy, becoming a man through starting work, must face the challenge in recognising himself in the creature that he helps deconstruct. "Singing My Sister Down" is a short story that explores themes of violence, justice, and grief through the physical location of a tar-pit. These are themes that Lanagan is known for, as I noted in my introduction. "Singing My Sister Down" is critically acclaimed, and it deals with these themes in subtle and nuanced ways using science fictional and fantasy genre conventions as a framework.

Several of Lanagan's narratives use explicitly Australian settings. I examine two key narratives that prioritise Australian settings to show how the blending of real-world locations challenges universalising genre conventions. In "Significant Dust", Lanagan takes a newspaper article from the 1980s and uses it as a pretext and narrative inspiration to explore aliens and alienation. "Until the Solid Earth Dissolves" is a post-apocalyptic story, which traces a group returning to a memorial to enact an ANZAC memorial ritual whose meaning has been diluted by time.

I will then discuss steampunk as an exemplar form of hybrid genre fiction. As a sub-genre of science fiction and fantasy, it has developed its own area of scholarship quite robustly. The protagonists in "Machine Maid" and "Blooding the Bride" are both recently married women. The stories explore themes of isolation, loyalty, and betrayal. They employ the conventions of steampunk in different ways and show that even as hybrid genres develop their own language and conventions, they are just as quickly challenged and manipulated to great effect.

## Time travel, portals, and alternate dimensions

Time travel is a familiar concept in science fiction and fantasy, as are dimensional portals, parallel worlds, timeslips, and other forms of temporal and spatial displacement. Stanislaw Lem, a science fiction writer and critic, argues that time travel is used as a structuring framework for science fiction narratives; however, he notes the shift in usage over time from logic games of causality and repercussions to becoming an "aesthetic" addition to narratives.<sup>61</sup> Lem had a significant impact on the field of science fiction scholarship; his essays in structuralism laid the foundations for Darko Suvin's later work on science fiction.<sup>62</sup> In the online edition of the *SF Encyclopedia*, time travel and timeslips are separated into unique entries; the difference is that time travel<sup>63</sup> is achieved through an explicit device, or technology, and is usually rationalised to some kind of science, while a timeslip<sup>64</sup> does not, and so is aligned closer to fantasy fiction. Alternate dimensions, or parallel worlds<sup>65</sup> function

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<sup>61</sup> Lem, 'The Time-Travel Story and Related Matters of SF Structuring'. 153

<sup>62</sup> Russ, *To Write Like a Woman*. 4

<sup>63</sup> Edwards, Stableford, and Langford, 'Time Travel'.

<sup>64</sup> Langford, 'Timeslip'.

<sup>65</sup> Stableford and Langford, 'Parallel Worlds'.

in fantastic places that overlap with the real world; these can be as a result of some physical rupture in the story world or operate with a fantasy gloss drawing on mythology, folklore, or other supernatural elements. As a concept, the parallel world is related to time travel and time slips, as they often enter narratives in similar ways. In terms of their relation to fantasy, Farah Mendlesohn's "intrusion mode" of fantasy, the trajectory of which explores the primary world being "ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality",<sup>66</sup> aligns best with time travel and parallel worlds. Mendlesohn notes that in this mode, the narrative aim is to disrupt, defeat, send back, or control the intrusion.<sup>67</sup>

Authors who use time travel, or timeslip, conventions do so with varying levels of rigour. This is determined by the theme's relation to the narrative arc and whether or not the secondary world draws on historical antecedents. When the time travel concept is closely tied to the narrative outcome, like in H. G. Well's *The Time Machine* or Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder", the act of time travel is made explicit to the reader and is shown to make sense within the story world. In other cases, the act of moving through time is a framing device, and the key elements of the narrative are defined by the relationship between characters and the secondary story world. In fantasy, the focus is usually on the characters displacement in space and time, rather than a methodical investigation of the philosophy of time travel, causality, morals and ethics of action versus inaction.

Katharina Boehm highlights a key motif in Lanagan's novel *Tender Morsels* is reimagining 'adolescence' as an "age-independent psychological phenomenon that is characterised by an opening of the self to (non)human others and to the realm of the social."<sup>68</sup> While Boehm is discussing Lanagan's novel *Tender Morsels* primarily, she also applies this thesis to some of Lanagan's short stories. In the literary tradition, a *Bildungsroman* is a narrative that traces the "acculturation of the self... into the general subjectivity of a community."<sup>69</sup> That is, it is a narrative about the recognition of the self as part of a wider community of selves. Boehm discusses *Tender Morsels* as a *Bildungsroman* but doesn't specifically extend the analysis of the displacement of 'coming of age' narratives to other age groups in Lanagan's short fictions. This may be due to the challenge in separating adolescence, coming-of-age, and

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<sup>66</sup> Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. 115

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 114

<sup>68</sup> Boehm, 'Crossover Fiction and the Adolescent Economy of Writing in the Works of Margo Lanagan'. 1007

<sup>69</sup> Redfield, 'The Phantom Bildungsroman'. 38

biological age, especially in the context of the Western English-speaking world, where those three factors do coincide around puberty. Due to this coincidence, the *Bildungsroman* is undoubtedly a literary genre that applies well to many of Lanagan's short stories and adds to the multiplicity of genre conventions at work. The conventions of fantasy, specifically heroic fantasy, sword and sorcery, are closely aligned with the coming-of-age narrative, as this is a plot arc that is commonly represented.<sup>70</sup> This is in part due to the structures of fantasy, often calling on traditional mythic models and modes and the folklore role of education with entertainment.

### White Time

In "White Time", Lanagan blends the concept of time travel and the *Bildungsroman* while also using excerpts of Sheneel's, the protagonist, school assignment to complicate the received narrative. "White Time" is 'time travel adjacent': it explores the mundane, bureaucratic management of the unforeseen side-effects of time travel - that is, entities being displaced in the titular 'white time'. Sheneel is a high school student assigned to a 'work-tasting' course over the school holidays at Commonweal White Time. The narrative uses sections of her report assignment to punctuate the dissonance between her 'lived' (narrated) experience and how she recounts it in a single document that summarises and reflects on her experience. Generically, "White Time" cues the reader's knowledge of time travel to indicate how and why the Commonweal White Time organisation exists. Sheneel is assigned to work with Lon, whose job is to enter 'white time' and 'redirect' the entities that have ended up there. Due to the nature of his work, he is given special permission to take certain drugs or medications via patches, and he is on the outer of the social exchanges with his other co-workers. Lon explains the nature of his work to Sheneel as follows,

Anyway, before they work out how to do it properly they go through the stage of flinging themselves out of their own time and expecting to go wherever they want, but to stay in exactly the same spot in the meta-universe as they started from. And, well, they do, but the trouble is, their planet or dust cloud or interstitial residence has moved on, see? What with your planets and galaxies orbiting, and your less predictable universal shifts. You following me?<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*. 87-88

<sup>71</sup> Lanagan, 'White Time'. 17

This explanation actually highlights some interesting flaws in other conceptions of time travel that do not take into account the movement of the earth around the sun in calculating where in space an entity is travelling to as well as when. This short passage of exposition explains precisely how and why the institute exists and shows that society has advanced to a moderately empathetic place.

Unlike other time travel narratives, where the protagonist is the one dipping in and out of time periods or moving from one historical moment to the next, Sheneel is anchored in her present. This subverts the norms of time travel narratives where “The time shift thus triggers ... a journey to self realization and emotional healing.”<sup>72</sup> Instead, Lanagan uses time travel as a backdrop. Sheneel then experiences an acute trauma when Lon actively tries to lose himself in the white time. It is ambiguous as to whether he means to travel through time or commits some sort of suicide, but the effect on Sheneel and his co-workers is the same. This event, like the narrative itself, is adjacent to the science fictional elements of the narrative. In doing this, Lanagan triggers Sheneel’s formative journey through the very human experience of trauma, loss, and grief. At this moment, she is beginning to see herself beyond the ‘I’,

For a second there she’d been a colleague, she’d been a fellow, and she wasn’t ready to be the fellow of someone like that. She was too whole and healthy; she was too young - couldn’t he see that? She didn’t know anything?<sup>73</sup>

The effect of combining the *bildungsroman* with the science fiction convention of time travel makes the vast theme of time manipulation seem very small against the visceral experience of human connection. Sheneel builds a connection with the slightly ostracised Lon, connecting through the work and becoming a colleague, if only for a brief moment. His almost death highlights the fragility of connection. Sheneel’s reaction and the closing words of Sir’s feedback on her report also deepen the genre play of the *Bildungsroman* by indicating that it takes many events and moments to coalesce in the maturing and integration of self with a community that the genre stands to represent.

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<sup>72</sup> Scott, ‘A Century of Dislocated Time: Time Travel, Magic and the Search for Self’. 17

<sup>73</sup> Lanagan, ‘White Time’. 45

## Big Rage

While “White Time” is clear about the science fictional time travel concept it employs, “Big Rage” uses the more ambiguous concept of a parallel world. Billie has come to Bunny Cottage in order to sequester herself from the world and process the end of an unhealthy marriage. She discovers an injured and unconscious warrior on the beach. The warrior is displaced in time, however unlike the convention of the protagonist being sent to a different time and working to return home, in “Big Rage”, Billie’s world is intruded upon by the warrior. Mendlesohn describes the ‘intrusion fantasy’ as relying on escalation for narrative progression,<sup>74</sup> and this seems to be the trajectory that Lanagan follows. Billie first sees the warrior in the sand dunes and thinks, “Maybe he drank too much at some costume party... it’s a good costume; look at the hand there, the overlapping plate like fish scales going down the fingers.”<sup>75</sup> At this, Lanagan is setting up the expectation of the fantasy intrusion, the warrior is clearly not in the right time or place, and we must go along the journey of Billie figuring that out and then seeing what she will do. The only concrete indication we have of how the warrior was able to penetrate into Billie’s reality is during the bonfire celebration when the red drink Billie is given enables her to understand the warrior people’s language. ‘Teeth-girl’ describes being set upon by bandits, “I guess our fear was great enough to thin the world skin.”<sup>76</sup> The tribes fear of physical violence and conflict mirrors Billie’s fear of emotional abuse and manipulation by her husband, James.

At the turning point of the narrative, when Billie confronts James on the beach during the bonfire celebration, the latent *Bildungsroman* narrative arc comes to fruition. Midalia states that “... the female *Bildungsroman*, reflective of historical and social realities and tied to a notion of typicality, has until fairly recently been obliged to depict the obstacles to development, the paucity of choices for women.”<sup>77</sup> Lanagan’s “Big Rage” challenges this, using the parallel worlds of fantasy to create a new opportunity for Billie, rather than another obstacle. As Boehm claims, the audience is invited “consider the lives and dilemmas of adult and aged characters alongside, or even over, those of the younger figures in her

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<sup>74</sup> Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. 115

<sup>75</sup> Lanagan, ‘Big Rage’. 105-106

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 124

<sup>77</sup> Midalia, ‘The Contemporary Female Bildungsroman: Gender, Genre and the Politics of Optimism.’ 89

stories.”<sup>78</sup> In fantasy, the metaphor becomes literal, and in response to James trying to intimidate Billie to return, she is able to breathe fire,

What comes out of me is fire. A roar of fire, a blast of fire, a curling, teeming, many-coloured chameleon-tongue of fire. It curves up the dune side and scorches the scrub at the top. James’s spread hand, with the wedding ring on it, sticks out like a drowning man’s.<sup>79</sup>

Ultimately Billie chooses to leave her reality in favour of the warrior’s world. This delivers a surprising but satisfying ending for the reader, as it shows Billie finding a greater sense of self with the more nomadic existence of the warrior tribe.

### Baby Jane

Lanagan also uses the parallel world convention in “Baby Jane” as a catalyst for the *Bildungsroman*. The protagonist is a young boy named Dylan, who is thrust into the role of a midwife, tending to a fantastic warrior queen. Boehm discusses “Baby Jane” for its gender role reversal and intergenerational collaboration. The representation of childbirth as having intergenerational significance is radical in science fiction and fantasy. Lanagan leans into childbirth as the real magic, even though there is fantastical magic at play. Lanagan creates a mirror between the intrusion of the fantastic and the act of giving birth. Dylan thinks this of his mother as they walk away from their hut, “Anything to do with babies and births, Mum usually took over. She became queenly herself, moving differently, spreading a radiant peacefulness all around. She paused the world so the baby could land on it safely.”<sup>80</sup> Dylan is called to action by the queen’s aide, and though he resists, he must rise to the challenge. After setting aside his amazement at the fantastic intrusion in his kitchen, Dylan gets to work fulfilling the role of a midwife and is shown to thrive in it. “He felt Mum’s queenly calm inside himself; he knew what to do, and how to move without hurry or stress from one task to the next.”<sup>81</sup> The aide has two devices, a listening loop and a talking loop, which enable him to speak to and understand Dylan. Both of which could operate as magical or technological devices, and in this narrative, it doesn’t matter, as the effect is the same. The

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<sup>78</sup> Boehm. 1008

<sup>79</sup> Lanagan, ‘Big Rage’. 127-128

<sup>80</sup> Lanagan, ‘Baby Jane’. 3

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 14

otherworldly crashes into Dylan's domestic space, bringing something magical into his family's mundane kitchen. In doing this, Lanagan is using the clashing of genre, the meeting of fantasy and reality, to create a magical in-between space to show the potential in individuals, that if allowed to be explored, has the potential to blossom and expand. Unlike other narratives that do not allow the fantastic to be confirmed as real, remaining ambiguous, Dylan's terror, the "Jibber-jabbers were real, too, but they were somewhere else, closed off from him now."<sup>82</sup> His growth is shown to come from his immersion into the domestic and motherly role of the midwife.

### The Proving of Smollett Standforth

"The Proving of Smollett Standforth" hybridises the Gothic ghost story with sword and sorcery<sup>83</sup> and parallel world narratives. Smollett, or Smol, is haunted by a ghost in his attic bedroom, who presses a necklace onto him night after night. The necklace causes welts and sores to appear around Smol's neck, showing that this haunting is not just in Smol's mind. The ghost is, in fact, a servant girl who projects herself, and a stolen necklace, through time. This is revealed, then used as a way for Smollett to push back against the 'ghost' and stop her from being able to escape the ramifications of her crime. This then frees him from her and the necklace's influence. This narrative uses sword and sorcery adventure conventions, but instead of allowing Smollett to go out into the world on a grand adventure, Lanagan draws him back into the small domestic space of his attic bedroom and forces him to encounter the otherworldly within this space. The attic, like the "claustrophobic spaces, sites of unconscious repression as much as physical oppression, to which we always return,<sup>84</sup>" signifies the Gothic icon, the castle. The attic as castle at this moment is a psychological space of protection, rather than a physical one.

The climax of the narrative challenges the conventions of sword and sorcery narratives, as Smol can identify with his antagonist and recognises himself in her. She is his other, the estranged self of a different time. As he makes his stand, to thrust the necklace back "into the cold syrup of the past," the girl tries to stop him calling out to her mistress. "Her hand

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>83</sup> Nicholls, 'Sword and Sorcery'.

<sup>84</sup> Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic*. 178

stopped his cry. It was not a soft lady's hand; it was worked to leather, cold and strong and real, and smelled of laundry soap."<sup>85</sup> He sees the "enormity" of what he is doing,

"the disgrace and punishment it would entail for her, not a ghost woman or a dream woman at all but an ordinary servant like himself, whose good name in her household was the only wealth that she had in the world."<sup>86</sup>

This manipulation of the genre inverts the narrative convention, creating a plot and setting that delves inward as a reversal of seeking outwardly; it is metonymic of the genre. Smol's non-adventure is made to stand in place of the expected sword and sorcery journey. His narrative is used to reflect the large outward journey in the domestic space, subverting expectations while still delivering a similar narrative fulfilment for the audience. Smol goes through the character development of a hero, embarking on a quest, all while remaining within his familiar domestic attic bedroom.

In all four of the stories mentioned, Lanagan manipulates genre to create narrative spaces that surprise the reader. By creating ambiguity around the use of time travel and slippage between parallel worlds, Lanagan crafts narratives that have layers of familiarity. In using time travel conventions to create secondary worlds and then challenging those same conventions, this familiarity, though, is never allowed to become comfortable. The intrusion of the other and the fantastic creates instability, even in science fictional and fantasy hybrids.

## Fantasy Worlds and Historical Fiction

Fantasy narratives, as discussed previously, are often about situations, characters or worlds that are deemed 'impossible'. Another feature that is often linked to fantasy narratives is a pseudo-medieval pastness, as secondary world settings are often built from pre-modern technology.<sup>87</sup> This feature allows for motifs such as magic to stand in for technology. There are variations within this, the common ones being 'high' and 'low' modes

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<sup>85</sup> Lanagan, 'The Proving of Smollet Standforth'. 97-96

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 96

<sup>87</sup> Young, 'Approaches to Medievalism'. 164

of fantasy. The work of Tolkien cemented this image of high fantasy in the collective literary conscience with alternate races like elves and orcs living alongside humans, while 'low fantasy' highlights the gritty daily life of various periods and places of medieval history, with supernatural intrusions. This relationship between the fantasy genre and history is complex, and it is often positioned in opposition to science fiction's future-looking tendencies. Fantasy looks to the past, while science fiction looks to the future, but this becomes blurred in the subgenres of alternate history and historical fantasy.

As popular fiction has evolved, different periods in history have been used for literary inspiration, for example, 1920s America and the prohibition era for hardboiled detectives and film noir aesthetics (which in turn inspired aspects of cyberpunk in works such as *Neuromancer* by William Gibson and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K. Dick). The fantasy that emerged in the post-WWII era coincided with the rise in suspicion about the authority of history. This early modern fantasy remained rooted in the medieval period with strong links to folklore and fairy tales and so came to be referred to as medievalist fantasy in later scholarship. Irina Ruppo Malone argues that "medievalist fantasy, like the historical adventure novel before it, is a game with history."<sup>88</sup>

Lanagan's stories "Tin Pocket" and "An Honest Day's Work" both take historical moments as inspiration and reinterpret those into secondary worlds that diverge from the 'traditional' medieval story world. "Singing My Sister Down" uses not a historical incident but the physical tar-pit. Tar-pits are large areas of naturally occurring asphalt. This is from bitumen seeping to the surface of the earth. Tar pits are a rich source of archaeological and biological material which inform human and non-human pasts.<sup>89</sup> This reflection on the past connects these three short stories, and they each reflect on how genre can evoke and enhance this relationship between literature and history.

### Tin Pocket

"Tin Pocket" is inspired by a historical account of pottheen or poitín smuggling in Ireland during the 1900s, included as a pretext to the short story. Pottheen is an illicit whiskey that was distilled and smuggled in tin lined pockets to avoid detection from authorities. The pre-

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<sup>88</sup> Malone, 'What's Wrong with Medievalism? Tolkien, the Strugatsky Brothers, and the Question of the Ideology of Fantasy'. 211

<sup>89</sup> See: 'La Brea Tar Pits and Hancock Park | La Brea Tar Pits'.

text is an excerpt of a historical account of Tom Boyle using a tin likeness of his wife to smuggle pottheen. While the historical account makes the reader aware that the real Tom Boyle's plot was discovered by the constable, in "Tin Pocket", the tin replica of Tom's wife, through means the reader is not made aware of explicitly, comes alive when struck by the constable's baton to avoid detection.

The blow was muffled by the skirt and the stockings on her, but still, Tom thought the man must have misstruck and the donkey's backside, for the solid thud that sounded, with not a hint of metal in it. But Fancy didn't rear and run as he ought. Instead, the blow shook right through the woman's body against Tom's back and arm.<sup>90</sup>

This turn towards magical interference causes the story to pivot from historical fiction to fantasy, introducing an impossible and unexplainable phenomenon within the story world of an object becoming animated. This transition is further heightened when the tin wife reveals her voice: "'The nerve of that man!' a slight *shinng!* Sounded at the back of the wife's voice, like a rough thumb testing a freshly sharpened knife blade."<sup>91</sup> The tin woman, though transformed, still smells of the alcohol and now appears as a doppelganger of Mary, Tom's wife. The tin wife remounts the donkey, astride instead of her original side-saddle position, and returns to object again. "Tom knocked the stockinged leg with his knuckle, and it gave back the dulled near-note of a filled metal canister."<sup>92</sup> This return to object, though changed, and having shown some agency, creates new problems for Tom and changes the reader's expectations for the ending of the narrative. Tom and the tin wife's retreat to a broken-down tower, a further visual signal, cements the shift of the narrative out of its historical mode and into a fantasy one. The tower is reminiscent of castles, princesses, adventure and conquest. The tin wife's role in the narrative as the agent of change pushes against Tom's resistance to her magical presence. He tries to ground himself in the earthy present:

He stroked the donkey's neck and smelled its hay-dust smell and felt its warmth on his shoulder, and that helped him loosen and breathe, but always he seized up again, frightened to have his back to the woman, frightened to face her.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Lanagan, 'Tin Pocket'. 23-24

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 25

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 26

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 26

Despite his fear, he extends human courtesies to the tin wife, “holding back branches as best he could from striking the wife or catching her clothing.”<sup>94</sup> His encounter with the tin wife is veiled in dream imagery, leaving it as an ambiguous coupling that could be a dream, or could be real. This is a fantasy world now, so the readers are cued to put aside their disbelief and prepare to embrace the impossible. Tom literally embraces the impossible, though within the framework of the story world, the dream-like state holds the explanation at arms-length.

When the wife put her hand on his arm, did she draw him out of sleep or into it? Whichever, it was it was warmer where she was... And then her body was smooth and unclothed and agleam all up and down his, breathing from every fine pore Docherty’s finest, heady and sharp, clearly real, clearly impossible.<sup>95</sup>

While the narrative and cultural conventions of ‘the other woman’ are not the focus of this encounter, the ability to dismiss the memory experience as a dream the following morning is a relief to Tom.

The conclusion of the story delivers the subversion that Lanagan is known for. Throughout the story, Mary’s desire for a child is prevalent. It is first filtered through Tom, who imagines what she would have said, had she seen all the children at the Tinkers patch: *“Is that fair, that they’re up to their ears in children, while decent settled folk have no one to hand down house and land to?”*<sup>96</sup> It seems then a cruel joke that the Keen’un would suggest the tin wife was pregnant for all her sleeping when he confronts Tom, *“Perhaps you’re to be blessed after all, Boyle.”*<sup>97</sup> It then seems even crueller that Tom is unfaithful to his wife with the tin wife. However, Lanagan’s note on the story shows that she wanted to ensure the real wife got “something out of the bargain too.”<sup>98</sup> Nine months later, Tom is woken up by the calls of his wife, who has discovered a child in the barn where the tin wife is kept. “The smell of whiskey billowed out warm-from the child, and from its mother hidden in the straw beyond it. He stared at that straw, alert for its merest movement.”<sup>99</sup> Tom’s wife Mary is gifted the

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 26

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 27

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 20

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 22

<sup>98</sup> Lanagan, ‘Story Notes’. 232

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 30

child she has longed for, and in so doing, can achieve something many female characters in fantasy fiction do not, happiness and fulfilment without sacrifice.

### An Honest Day's Work

In "An Honest Day's Work",<sup>100</sup> the protagonist, Armarlis, is missing all or part of one leg and uses a crutch for mobility. There is no pretext to indicate the historical link to the narrative; however, the narrative begins like historical fiction, positioning the protagonist in his domestic home, fully immersed in his own culture, vernacular, and belief system.

Jupi's talkie-walkie crackled beside his plate. Someone jabbered out of it,  
'You about, chief?'  
All four of us stopped chewing. We'd been eating slowly, silently. We all  
knew that this was nearly the last of our peasepaste and drumbread.<sup>101</sup>

The inversion of walkie-talkie to 'talkie-walkie' indicates the slightly off-kilter nature of this story world in relation to the real world of the reader. Followed with the words 'peasepaste and drumbread', which sound like peas paste and durum bread, invites us into Armarlis's world to experience his world through his language. This type of narrative immersion is common in historical fantasy. Through employing the details of a time or place, an authenticity can be created, indicating that this imaginary world on the page does stand-in for the real-world analogue.

The historical industry that "An Honest Day's Work" mirrors is whaling. The creature that is hauled through the water and pushed up the plan by tug boats is giant and humanoid and seemingly not quite dead. It is implied that these creatures come through a dimensional rift out in the ocean. The industry of deconstructing large mammals for their materials, with the added strangeness of making the sentience of the creature plain to readers, is glossed over by the characters. The experienced Jupi describes the incoming creature as having "one leg, one arm, but sizeable. Good big head, good sex. Not junk."<sup>102</sup> When Armarlis sees the creature in the distance, he describes it like this:

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<sup>100</sup> Citations for "An Honest Day's Work" come from the Kindle edition of Yellowcake, and so page numbers have not been provided. Instead, I have included a Kindle location, though these only deliver an approximation of the quoted text locations and may vary between devices.

<sup>101</sup> Lanagan, 'An Honest Day's Work'. Location 795

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. Location 813

At first, all we could see was the backlit bulk of the thing, with a few bright rags of aura streaming in the wind, thinning as it came closer. The light from the sun, which as yet was below the horizon, made the thick shroud glow, and the body shape was a dark blur within it. I thought I could see a head, against a bigger torso. But you can't be sure with these things; they're never the same twice in their build and features, in their arrangement of limbs.<sup>103</sup>

In this description, Armarlis is doubled in the physiology of this particular creature. His own "withered leg" <sup>104</sup>and crutch, which meant he could not get away with rudeness at home, now means he has some resemblance to this giant alien creature. The mingling of fantasy and history makes clear the strangeness of breaking a creature down for its useful parts. It also shows this as a regular part of this world, though the protagonist is new to this specific environment. This makes Armarlis's vivid description of the plan and his work feel authentic. He has known of these practices, but this is the first time seeing them up close.

### Singing My Sister Down

Violence, justice, and grief are reoccurring themes in Margo Lanagan's fiction. In "Singing My Sister Down", <sup>105</sup> the nameless protagonist's sister, Ikky, is sentenced to death by drowning in a tar-pit for the crime of murdering her husband. The family joins Ikky in her punishment, to sing to her, and feed her, and celebrate her remaining life to ease her suffering. This practice also makes the punishment apply to the whole family as a unit. Through this ritual, grief is explored as a complicated response to death and violence. Lanagan manipulates genre very subtly in these stories, using memory and the physical setting to propel the narrative.

Lanagan employs techniques in this and her other stories that create a sense of realness. These story worlds are only just removed from our own reality. It is this jarring 'almost' similarity that makes this a strange and unsettling narrative.

"Singing My Sister Down" begins, "We all went down to the tar-pit, with mats to spread our weight."<sup>106</sup> The narrator is revealing to us his world, society, and culture. The tar-pit, though fantastic to readers unfamiliar with the tar-pits (found in Europe and the USA), is an

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. Location 869

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. Location 805

<sup>105</sup> Black Juice, 2004

<sup>106</sup> Lanagan, 'Singing My Sister Down'. 3

everyday location to the protagonist. This dissonance is continued when following this, Ikky is shown to have a “metal twin-loop” around her hands, and Chief Barnandra tells the family they can follow Ikky out onto the tar pit once she has gone and found a place to stop.<sup>107</sup> These seemingly innocuous remarks are weighted with hidden meaning, not yet revealed; it is alluded to through the way the narrator describes the details of his world. That Ikky steps out “very ordinary,” “she walked the way you walk on the tar, except without the arms balancing,”<sup>108</sup> and her family follows once she stops. The narrator observes that this is like the family being punished too, “everyone watching us walk out to that girl that is our shame.”<sup>109</sup> The world is imagined and described to be different from reality, but not so far as to be ‘unrealistic’. This is due to the driving action of the narratives being based very firmly on recognisable community and family-based feelings and actions.

The setting is, however, fantastic, confirmed by the passing “fish-people” and “yellow-cloths.”<sup>110</sup> The narrative is structured around the progression of the day and the ritual of Ikky’s drowning in the tar-pit. The narrator’s observations, and his language, create a world that feels familiar. This is a society with law and order, justice, a village, and families who connect and disconnect through social customs such as marriage, and death, which on the one hand makes it seem very unsettling and foreign, but on the other hand, feels strangely familiar as we connect to the human fears and desires of the narrator. It is through his observation that we discover the crime that Ikky is being punished for was murder, using an axe to kill her new husband. Her mother teases her when she is truly stuck in the tar:

‘Oh yeah, well and truly stuck,’ said Mumma. ‘But then you knew that when you picked up that axe-handle you were sticking yourself.’  
 ‘I did know.’  
 ‘No coming unstuck from this one. You could’ve let that handle lie.’  
 That was some serious teasing.  
 ‘No, I couldn’t, Mumma, and you know.’<sup>111</sup>

This half revelation allows a ferment of ideas to surround the possible reasons for Ikky’s actions. These possibilities are never resolved, as the narrator is too young to be exposed to

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 4

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 9

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 6

the reality by his family. However, the reader can draw possible conclusions that perhaps Ikky's actions were retaliation for abuse, mistreatment, or railing against the patriarchal norms enforced by the husband. Her mother accepts her daughter's actions and the consequences but still thinks she was foolish and impulsive. Ikky's slow sinking into the tar and her family singing her down resonates throughout the narrative.

In his interaction with Aunt Mai on the banks of the tar pit, the narrator begins to step into his own voice to assert his own opinion. He has been sent to collect a wreath of flowers, and Aunt Mai resist joining the family on the tar to send off Ikky:

She shook her head. 'She's cloven my heart in two with that axe of hers.'  
'What, so you'll chop hers as well, this last hour?'  
We glared at each other in the bonfire light, all loaded down with the fine,  
pale flowers.<sup>112</sup>

Aunt Mai represents the female reinforcement of the patriarchal control of this society. Her lamentation that Ikky "should have *cared* what she did to this family" shows that Mai believes that Ikky should have persevered in whatever situation she found herself in with her new husband to avoid bringing this shame on herself and the family. This adds to the deeper understanding that divorce is shameful in this world, which in turn reinforces the complex gender roles of this society. The social transgression inherent in whatever crime Ikky committed is clear. Like the final expression of grief from the narrator:

I had a big sickening-up of tears, and they tell me I made an awful noise that frightened everybody right up to the chief, and that the husband's parents thought I was a very ill-brought-up boy for upsetting them...<sup>113</sup>

At this moment, the narrator is breaking the social customs, and he is not allowing the also grieving family of the husband to "serenely and superiorly watch justice be done for their lost son."<sup>114</sup> This is the only moment we get a sense of how Ikky's deceased husband's family might be feeling through these events. As the narrator emerges from the tar pit, his grief is taken over by "several gaping mouths of truth."<sup>115</sup> His growth, his advancement and recognition of himself as an individual within his community shrinks somewhat as he

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 11

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 16

wrestles with these new thoughts in his head that don't quite fit. "As if all I could ever do was watch but not ever know anything, not ever understand."<sup>116</sup> Lanagan's protagonist carries us through his experience of grief, even though he doesn't fully understand or recognise it himself at times. In placing this experience against a fantastic otherworldly setting, we are reminded of how enduring human emotions are no matter what kind of world they might exist in.

Through these narratives, the engagement of fantasy with history is challenged through the representation of memory, experiences of the self within social structures, and how narrative can be informed by history, but also how history and our way of telling it is informed by narrative. "Tin Pocket" rewrites a historical anecdote, hybridising it with a fantastic mode to create a narrative that explores a moment in history. This exploration shows how Tom and Mary create a narrative out of the fantastic events to establish a new life with the tin wife's child. "An Honest Day's Work" creates a mirroring between a giant otherworldly beast and a young disabled boy, who must navigate his society as both an insider and an outsider. "Singing My Sister Down" uses the historically significant location of the tar-pit to explore the interconnections between society, culture, and justice. In these diverse ways, these three stories layer fantastic modes with mimetic expression to complicate the relationship of these texts with their narrative and genre conventions.

## Settings as perspective

The scholarship on Australian science fiction and fantasy is limited. It is also conflicted. Andrew Macrae calls speculative fiction "literary fiction's awkward twin, a slightly embarrassing sibling who refuses to let go of childhood."<sup>117</sup> This opinion reflects a larger trend of dismissing speculative genres, but in Macrae's essay, he goes on to liken literary fiction and speculative fiction through their ostracism in Australian culture.<sup>118</sup> Macrae is not trying to defend science fiction and fantasy in Australia, but he is not condemning either; he is observing a general trend observed in the segregation of literature and writing as a whole,

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>117</sup> McCrae, 'Alternative Worlds'. 29

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

and then within that of speculative genres and the literary mainstream. In contrast, Kim Wilkins discusses the rise and success of Australian Fantasy. In her essay, though, she notes that the fantasy she is discussing does not necessarily prioritise the national sensibilities of its authors; rather, it relies on the universalising popular conventions to find access points in a global market.<sup>119</sup>

Yet, it is written in Australia by Australian writers, and is read by Australian readers. Australian fantasy fiction therefore is Australian literature and yet somehow is not Australian literature at the same time.<sup>120</sup>

While much of Margo Lanagan's fiction doesn't prioritise a specific sense of Australian-ness as motif, some of her key works do. In these stories, there is a subtle undercurrent of distrust for the iconic Australian narrative, such as colonial settlement, patriarchal norms, and the 'battler' spirit. This distrust is shown through the way characters realise the flaws in the way they hold narratives about themselves. The stories I discuss here place the idea of Australia, its landscape, and its people into the centre of the narrative. "Significant Dust" takes a UFO story from the 1980s and places a young woman adjacent to the event, processing her own trauma. The physical isolation of working in a small community, hours and hours from the nearest city, marks the narrative with the long history of bush stories in the vein of Henry Lawson. "Until the Solid Earth Dissolves" is set in a future that is a post-apocalyptic and potentially dystopian version of Melbourne. The characters are travelling to a war memorial to re-enact a memorial ceremony. It is a powerful examination of how Australian culture deifies its military memorials and imaginatively engages with how our current thinking might look centuries from now.

The national flavour of these narratives draws on the Australian literary tradition of 'the bush', our native fauna, and settings, like Melbourne city. The primacy of nationality, of place as identity, is unusual in speculative genre fiction. The discussion around Indigenous science fiction and fantasy is in its infancy and is a growing area of interest.<sup>121</sup> Indigenous engagement with genre fiction opens a further discussion about representation, expression, and how creative acts can destabilise cultural norms for more empathetic advancement.

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<sup>119</sup> Wilkins, 'Popular Genres and the Australian Literary Community'.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 265

<sup>121</sup> Key early texts include: Attebery, 'Aboriginality in Science Fiction'. Polak, *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction*.

Indigenous writers are adding their voice to the deconstruction of colonialism through science fiction and fantasy.<sup>122</sup> While this area is of great significance and interest, it is not an area of scholarship or creativity that is relevant to Margo Lanagan's fiction.

As noted in my introductory section on Hybrid Genre fiction, diverse perspectives in genre fiction are becoming more common. The act of placing a specific national identity within fiction shows how limited the previous iterations in the genre have been. The new potential in diverse voices allows science fiction and fantasy to explore even more imaginative possibilities. The act of overlapping genre conventions with ideas about and from Australia creates a dialogue between how a culture recognises and creates a sense of self and how that culture might appear from the outside.

### Significant Dust

Vanessa, the protagonist of "Significant Dust," isolates herself from her family by leaving the city and taking up a job at a roadhouse in Mundrabilla, located between the Nullarbor Desert and the Great Australian Bight. The pretext of the story references a lab report of a car involved in a UFO encounter and investigation. This is a real event that was reported by the Knowles family, who were driving from Melbourne to Perth in 1988. Local and interstate police investigated the incident. The result of the investigation attributed the paranormal experience to a car tyre blowing while the car was travelling at speed on the highway.<sup>123</sup> The laboratory report notes "no significant dust"<sup>124</sup> was found on the vehicle, giving the story its title. The narrative opens in the isolation of outback Australia and the small community created around a roadhouse eatery and bar. Vanessa has arrived, and unlike the other girls who pass through who all had a 'plan,' this is as far as her plan has taken her. She is grappling with an unspoken trauma, a dark secret that she tells no one about. Vanessa, through a foolish prank, caused her sister to become a paraplegic. The reader discovers this secret through the flashbacks that Vanessa relates. The narrative relies on the mimetic qualities of the narration, and these memories, to cast doubt on the strangeness of the

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<sup>122</sup> See examples such as: Claire G. Coleman's 2016 debut novel *Terra Nullius*, and recent ABC television series *Cleverman*, directed by Wayne Blair and Leah Purcell.

<sup>123</sup> Gage and Keane, 'South Australia's X-Files'.

<sup>124</sup> Lanagan, 'Significant Dust'. 71

grey-eyed man, his car covered in “gunpowder-grit,”<sup>125</sup> and to ensure the ambiguous ending of the story.

In the opening of the story, Vanessa is asked which country she would travel to first, and though she evades the question, her thoughts tell the reader: “Which country? He might as well ask which *star*. Look at them up there, all the same, all more or less bright.”<sup>126</sup> By thinking about the impossibility of answering the question, Vanessa primes the reader. In science fiction and fantasy, where the unreal and the impossible become the real and the possible, this outward searching gaze signifies Vanessa’s alien and alienating journey.

The appearance, then the disappearance, of the grey-eyed man further deepens the mystery of this story world. He appears at the roadhouse, covered in black dust that trails after him. Vanessa thinks:

She would have been glad to be able to help him in some little way—not too much, not to get *involved*. And she would have been glad to show—to show *whom*, if she was going to keep it so quiet?—that she could respect his silence.<sup>127</sup>

He represents a strange possibility to her, that of reconnecting with a community. This is contrasted with Vanessa’s running.

She runs through the saltbush—or the bluebush. She can’t tell the difference in the dusk, and does she care anyway? She runs because she can, running away from the fact that she can—running is the problem and the cure both at once, the same mess as everything.<sup>128</sup>

Vanessa runs, even though her sister, who is now a paraplegic cared for by her parents, cannot. This is why running is the cure and the problem.

She can lose all this and still be the lucky one. She can be an embarrassment to everyone, and disgusting to herself and a complete waste of space, life and moving parts, and still she can walk away.<sup>129</sup>

The tangible world being described is grounded in a recognisable time and place. While the pretext dates the lab report as 1988, Vanessa tells the grey-eyed man that it is 1982. Through this subtle detail, the narrative takes on elements of time travel as well. The

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 80

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 72

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 81

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 77

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 78-79

implied existence of some alien craft flying over the desert would ordinarily place this within the genre of science fiction. The use of aliens in science fiction is common, and often operates as a representation of racism or race relations that already exist in our global society. However, in Lanagan's narrative, the aliens do not seem to represent another race or act as a way of engaging with Australian race issues. Instead, they remain aloof and ambiguous, except for Vanessa: "She knows about the other light, too—without noticing, without worrying or understanding or caring very much."<sup>130</sup> This way of grounding the fantastic in the mundane, reducing the exceptional presence of otherworldly beings, to notes about the movement of lights across her wardrobe, challenges the norms of alien narratives. Similarly, her encounter with the alien craft is evocative and sensory:

She wakes and the room is lit gold, almost unbearably hot. A puff of dust comes in under the near-closed blind, a puff of death. The thing whines in the otherwise complete silence, summoning or questioning—*investigative*... she calls out, because she feels she ought to, although she wanted this thing to visit, would have invited it if she knew how.<sup>131</sup>

As Vanessa leaves the roadhouse for what is implied to be the last time, the reader is left with the uncertain possibility of what she is going to find. "It's good to just run, not think, to move like a machine through the night, across the plain, towards any possibility at all."<sup>132</sup> While one possibility is that she is running towards an extraterrestrial encounter, the narrative resists confirming or denying the reality of this belief. This challenges the usual endings of alien narratives that end in either or both humanity and the aliens reaching annihilation and treads the liminal space between science fictional fact and fantastic belief.

### Until the Solid Earth Dissolves

"Until the Solid Earth Dissolves" was written for a special edition of *Overland* magazine, which explored what a future Melbourne city would look like. The protagonist, Roo, is an older woman who is cycling with a group of people to the war memorial in Melbourne city. She has joined the troupe, not as a 'believer' but to care for and support her ailing grandfather. It is a desolate and apocalyptic landscape, and the scale of the crisis is revealed through the mundane thoughts of the protagonist: "Nobody's squatted here for a long time.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 87

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 98

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 104

Filters only last so long, after all, and people have to follow the water..."<sup>133</sup> This setting is recognisable as a science fiction convention, though spun through the unique lens of the Australian landscape. The outback, or bush, is an image with strong cultural significance. It is the natural home of our First Nations people; it is a symbol of the isolation and hostile environment our settler-colonial forebears had to endure. However, it also has already been used as-is to represent science fictional vistas, such as the *Mad Max* films.<sup>134</sup> So, to extract a different version of a future Australia, using the ruined cityscape as vista, is an exciting flipping of the norm. For Roo, this is a world of displacement; squatting is a permanent way of being, "Camp life is all we've known, with the locals sniffing and sneering round the edges. That's as permanent as things are likely to get."<sup>135</sup> But as the group arrives at their destination, Roo can slow down and ruminate, revealing more of her life and family as she enters the war memorial.

It's all about things lost, that people wanted to be kept. I know about that now, now that my Sukie's left, to follow that-work-she-does all around the world, to change from my girl that I could hug and kiss good morning and goodnight, into a bunch of slideshows piped onto my screen from wherever she is now. I know about lost stuff, since I handed my son over in marriage to Lou-Anne. Those babies are gone from everywhere but MYPhoto and memories, untouchable as people's gods that they believe in, nonexistent as a dried-out city.<sup>136</sup>

Here Roo is drawing her own experiences into the narrative she is forming about why the war memorial was made and reflecting on the vain-glorious hope of the creators to erect an object to commemorate a legacy, which she calls "warmongers work."<sup>137</sup> This scepticism about the glorification of war, of conflict, is characteristic of a modern Australia.<sup>138</sup>

This scepticism also connects with the problematic relationship with gender in the narrative. Gender binaries are represented as ideal, and "in-betweeners"<sup>139</sup> is a term of derision. This hostility is veiled through health concerns over water quality through a water

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<sup>133</sup> Lanagan, 'Until the Solid Earth Dissolves'. 52

<sup>134</sup> See for example, the original 1979 film *Mad Max* and the 1981 sequel *Mad Max 2*, both directed by George Miller.

<sup>135</sup> Lanagan, 'Until the Solid Earth Dissolves'. 52

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 58

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 57

<sup>138</sup> See article dialogue between Michael Slater and Matthew Beard: Slater, 'Anzac Day: militarism and masculinity don't mix well in modern Australia'; Beard, 'Can We Celebrate Anzac Day without Glorifying War?'

<sup>139</sup> Lanagan, 'Until the Solid Earth Dissolves'. 53

filter incident between Roo and her daughter-in-law. This incident is used metonymically, standing in for the way this society acts and reacts to water quality and its related health concerns.

The ANZAC spirit is held in the highest regard, even though the Gallipoli narrative told about them most is one of failure, not triumph.<sup>140</sup> While this tactical and humane failure is not explicitly referenced in "Until the Solid Earth Dissolves," it permeates the narrative and Roo's narration.

ANZAC spirit is what Believing is all about, staying steady, doing what has to be done, not losing sight of a goal, looking after our mates, remembering what side we're on. He makes us out to be very noble, having pedalled down here to 'do honour' to 'the Diggers' and to 'remembrance' them.<sup>141</sup>

The slight imperfections to the language, 'do honour' and 'remembrance them', signifies the great span of time that separates these characters from the originating rituals they are re-enacting. The religious zealotry that is implied in the capitalise 'Believing' that the ANZAC spirit has imbued these people with is likewise recognised as imperfect. Then there is a subtle shift within Roo, as the words begin to affect her in ways she did not expect, "Poetry, eh? It's a kind of horrible magic: it's only words, you think, and then the words stab you, and twist in your stomach, and tweak your tear ducts, for God's sake."<sup>142</sup>

Early in the narrative, Roo explains her own way of being in the world as:

"Things astound me less and less, as a middle-ageing grandma. I can't get outraged the way Davis can, to fuel his political stuff. All I can do is say my piece and then get out of people's hair."<sup>143</sup>

But later, after the shifting emotional experience of cleaning and preparing the memorial, and then the ritual service itself, she is engulfed in a new feeling of smallness:

"History is too big for me. It stirs up too much feeling; the sacrifices people have made are too awesome, and the events are too detailed. I don't know what to do with it all."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Crotty, 'Gallipoli, Trial and Trauma'.

<sup>141</sup> Lanagan, 'Until the Solid Earth Dissolves'. 59

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 59

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 53

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 61

This moment of recognising the scale of history and Roo's small place within it creates a sense of perspective. The long history of Australia as a nation can only ever be experienced in the singular existence of individuals. However, through this fictional engagement, it is possible to imagine how our future selves will reflect on the present time of the reader.

## Steampunk powered women

Steampunk is an exemplar mode of the practice of genre hybridisation in fiction. Steampunk is usually identified as a subgenre of science fiction, though it has strong links to fantasy and itself variously employs modes of the fantastic, gothic, and science fictional. As a literary genre, it combines tropes, conventions, and themes from science fiction and fantasy and their subgenres, alternate history, magical realism or urban fantasy. The first use of the term 'steampunk' was instigated by K. W. Jeter,<sup>145</sup> when he grouped together gaslight romances<sup>146</sup> that had a particular focus on technology.<sup>147</sup> He was consciously evoking the existing term 'cyberpunk,' another science fiction subgenre of technology-focused and anti-authoritarian fiction. The existing steampunk scholarship focuses on the relationship steampunk has with history and how it hybridises history and fiction. However, less attention is paid to the ways authors utilise science fiction and fantasy conventions to create steampunk narratives.

Margaret Rose discusses Lanagan's short story, "Machine Maid," in "Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation," but only in the essay's conclusion. "Machine Maid" is an unsettling narrative that engages with post-colonial critique and feminist discussions of gender roles. Similarly, "Blooding the Bride" is a short story reminiscent of Gothic ghost stories and challenges reader expectations through Lanagan's manipulation of genre. I will examine "Machine Maid" and "Blooding the Bride" for their use of genre conventions and engagement with historical motifs, specifically in relation to the steampunk genre.

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<sup>145</sup> Jeter, 'Letter'. 57 – also via Rose, 320

<sup>146</sup> Gaslight, or gaslamp, romances are the precursors to steampunk, though the latter foregrounds extrapolating the technology of the era, rather than the romance of the former. For more on this see: Windling, 'What Is Gaslamp Fantasy?'

<sup>147</sup> Rose notes that this was in order to align his own work, *Infernal Devices* (1986), with that of Tim Powers, *The Anubis Gates* (1983), and James Baylock, *Homonculus* (1986).

Steampunk combines tropes and thematic cues of science fiction, fantasy, and often their sub-genres, such as magical realism and urban fantasy. It can draw parallels to weird fiction, another hybrid genre of fiction, but with the incorporation of more horror and less historical elements. Steampunk's primary predecessor are alternate histories: "the alternate history as a genre speculates about such topics as the nature of time and linearity, the past's link to the present, the presents link to the future, and the role of individuals in the history-making process."<sup>148</sup> Steampunk fiction specifically employs social and literary tropes of the nineteenth century, exploring the rapidly developing technology of that time. A key feature of steampunk fiction is that it extrapolates how that technology could have progressed should certain nexus events have occurred differently.<sup>149</sup> Steampunk tends to also recast historical figures in various alternate roles or re-imagines their pasts. This is done to "anchor steampunk fiction in the real, only to have that realism exploded by the eruption of the fantastic."<sup>150</sup> In doing this, steampunk is also concerned with the representation of historical fact and the limited nature of the historical record; it asks the reader to rethink their assumption about the histories they know.<sup>151</sup>

*The Difference Engine* by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling has been the focus for many academics<sup>152</sup> in their discussion of steampunk and cyberpunk literatures. *The Difference Engine* is the only steampunk work referenced by many scholars.<sup>153</sup> It makes sense that steampunk and cyberpunk are brought together in an irreverent collective of 'punk' genres.<sup>154</sup> However, it is problematic that a single text has come to stand in for an entire genre. Rose remedies this imbalance in her essay on an anthology of steampunk fiction and also addresses Lanagan's "Machine Maid" in her conclusion.

Steampunk decisively rejects distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture. Instead, its focus is examining the intersections between culture, society, and technology, drawing

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<sup>148</sup> Hellekson, 'Toward a Taxonomy of the Alternate History Genre'. 254

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. 252

<sup>150</sup> Rose, 'Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation'. 323

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 319

<sup>152</sup> See Hantke, 'Difference Engines and Other Infernal Devices: History According to Steampunk'. Hellekson, 'Toward a Taxonomy of the Alternate History Genre'. Ramos, 'Alternate World Building'. Spencer, 'Rethinking Ambivalence'. Sussman, 'Cyberpunk Meets Charles Babbage: "The Difference Engine" as Alternative Victorian History'.

<sup>153</sup> Rose, 319

<sup>154</sup> Other '-punks' include: Atompunk, Dieselpunk, Nanopunk, Petrolpunk, and Splatterpunk.

inspiration from an era where such things were becoming hierarchically distinguished.<sup>155</sup> This is why the Victorian era has become a key element in steampunk literature, as authors have found it productive to liken contemporary characters to those of the Victorian era, creating cognitive and temporal dissonance. Victorians are the very distant ancestors of contemporary white western society, yet despite this, we can recognise much of ourselves in their experiences and life. This “allows steampunk to call the orthodox idea of progress into question, without abandoning the possibility of change altogether.”<sup>156</sup>

Rose and Steffen Hantke both discuss the value of steampunk’s historical representation. Hantke examines how steampunk rearranges ontological concerns in imagined worlds; Rose considers how the imaginative representation of history affects how readers engage with history. Hantke asserts that because steampunk narratives “do not take place in a recognizable past, [they] cannot be primarily concerned with the problems of how we can know and understand the past.”<sup>157</sup> However, Rose asserts that the accuracy of small historical details “is the key to the entire game,”<sup>158</sup> and that in doing this “steampunk fiction puts tremendous value on the practice of engaging with the factual past, especially when the engagement reveals a historical world that differs from the one we expected.”<sup>159</sup>

### Machine Maid

“Machine Maid,” briefly discussed by Rose for its steampunk characteristics, begins like historical fiction, set in an Australian colonial gold rush town. However, the history is quickly twisted when the sign in town for Mrs Hubert Bawden’s advertises “Companions Live and Electric.”<sup>160</sup> This twist in the history of these mechanical automata and electricity arriving at the colony in the form of ‘living dolls’ changes the reader’s expectations of the sexual dynamics and interpersonal relations between men and women in this new world. The other historical details imply that the rest of this story world aligns with our shared reality and memory of the gold rush. The mimetic elements of the story ground it in the colonial Australian gold rush, likely a boomtown like Ballarat, in Victoria. It is the introduction of the

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<sup>155</sup> Rose, 326

<sup>156</sup> Rose, 328

<sup>157</sup> Rose, 248

<sup>158</sup> Rose, 324

<sup>159</sup> Rose, 325

<sup>160</sup> Lanagan, ‘Machine Maid’. 260

living dolls, automata, that are self-powered, so able to move over a wide area – if programmed to, that changes the social landscape.

The story focuses on domestic space, sexuality and sexual expression. These automata are used for entertainment, and chores, convenient servants without needs or desires. While human servants remain employed, they are shown to be fickle and likely to leave at their discretion. As Mrs Goverman is introduced to Clarissa, the maid automata, she is captivated by the mechanisms which power her. Her husband teases:

“Have I taken an engineer for a wife?” He spoke in an amused tone, but I heard the edge in it of my mother’s anxiety, felt the vacancy in my hands where she had snatched away the treatise on artificial movement I had taken from my brother Artie’s bookshelf. *So unbecoming, for a girl to know such things.*<sup>161</sup>

Mrs Goverman laments that “I was not to engage with the world myself, but only to witness and encourage the men’s engagement.”<sup>162</sup> However, she is given the opportunity to explore this interest in Clarissa’s machinery when her husband is away for weeks, surveying the bounds of the property. Clarissa, through an accidental utterance, responds to a command Mrs Goverman had not known about: Clarissa kneels, drops her bodice, prepares her mouth and waits. Mrs Goverman “... crouched before her awful readiness. I knew how tall my husband was; I knew what this doll was about.”<sup>163</sup> Mrs Goverman goes on to find a hidden list of secret commands in Clarissa’s charging alcove. She is challenged by this form of sexuality and investigates further: “Clarissa’s other activities - I began to study and translate them next morning - were more obviously, comically, hideously calculated to meet a man’s needs.”<sup>164</sup> Mrs Goverman is disgusted but intrigued by Clarissa’s vacant sexuality. She recognises the ways her husband demands sex from her and how Clarissa’s mechanisms passively accept similar commands. Mrs Goverman spends her time examining and documenting the processes, pitting her scientific mind against the grotesqueness she sees in Clarissa’s functions. She resists exploring her own sexuality, repressing it. She becomes paranoid, circling the isolated house on occasion to ensure no-one saw her:

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid. 264

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. 270

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. 272

For what was anyone to make of the scene, of the half-clothed automaton whirring and squirming in her mechanical pleasure, of the cold-faced human seated on the ottoman watching, of the list dropped to the floor so as not to be crumpled in those tight-clenched fists?<sup>165</sup>

It is the tension between the expectation of history and the introduction of strange technology through Mrs Goverman's own unexpressed sexuality and fascination with Clarissa's sexuality that the feminist postcolonial science fiction elements combine to create the unsettling tones of the story. By disrupting the expectation created by employing genre tropes and modes, "Machine Maid" creates a narrative space that positions women as masters of their domestic space and how much that can affect the world around them. From this space, they can inflict injury, death, as well as creation and nurturing.

### Blooding the Bride

"Blooding the Bride"<sup>166</sup> is more ambiguous in its historical setting, though it also draws the reader into a steampunk world. The cars produce "varying clouds of steam and smoke,"<sup>167</sup> the family provided "houses, motors, private airships, gyros, and the very best of schooling for their son,"<sup>168</sup> and the helicopter later in the story emits both a cloud of steam and a black cloud of petrol exhaust.<sup>169</sup> This reveals that this is a hybrid steampunk world, a blending of petrol, and steam power, which deviates from the expectation of a solely steampowered society. Despite this technological setting, the curse upon the Greaves family is from fantasy: A pact with a devil who then claims the wedding night to rape the wives in order to grant the men power. This 'blooding' is meant to indoctrinate women into the family, and Loriane's future mother-in-law, Cordelia, enforces the status quo, as she hints to Loriane what is to come after the wedding:

*There is much to endure in a marriage, Cordelia had said in the parlor, to Loriane alone, on the day Lucas announced their engagement. One must... enlarge one's sensibilities, to allow it to assume its proper shape. Her eye*

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid. 273

<sup>166</sup> Citations for "Blooding the Bride" come from the Kindle edition of Exotic Gothic 4 (edited by Daniel Olson), and so page numbers have not been provided. Instead, I have included a Kindle location, though these only deliver an approximation of the quoted text locations and may vary between devices.

<sup>167</sup> Lanagan, 'Blooding the Bride'. Location 376

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. Location 486

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. Location 540

had glinted at Loriane. *And there are rewards, she had said, for enduring what we must endure, as Greaves, as Greaves wives.*<sup>170</sup>

The presence of Cordelia shows the way women can enforce the patriarchy, and in doing so, further undermines their own agency and power.

Then....She had *shrivelled*, was how it looked. She seemed to forget that Loriane was there, and her composure faltered. Her face was all bone, her mouth all doubt. And then she had drawn a long harsh breath as though to counteract her own shrinking, and Loriane had watched her reconstruct herself: realign her vertebrae, draw her unblinking mask again across her feelings. She had not answered the question, and Loriane had not had the courage to press the matter.<sup>171</sup>

Cordelia has endured the unthinkable in order to obtain and maintain the power she wields as a Greaves wife. But this power pales in comparison to the power and rewards given to Greaves men in return for their wives' sacrifices. Cordelia has power over her son until he marries and is also inducted into this ritual. It is not shown in the narrative, but his appearance at the end indicates that he too has been isolated to ensure he would endure this curse or pact.

But a body—heavy, clumsy, not divine—flung itself on her. With a crude, blunt, unflaming voice, this man cried protest into Loriane's neck... The women shrieked and tore at Lucas, but he turned over, and fought them away.<sup>172</sup>

It is reductive to assert that Lucas is enacting the feminist narrative here. He is intervening in the violent transgression against another human being, his wife. However, this challenge to the gender roles assigned in fiction shows how men must also actively challenge the prevailing norms if there is to be a significant change. Loriane is not a damsel in distress, and Lucas is not a knight in shining armour; instead, they end as a couple, alive and united in their quest. They do ride away on a horse, though,<sup>173</sup> linking back to the genre conventions of happily riding off into the sunset, but without the rose-tinted glasses usually ascribed by fantasy.

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid. Location 389

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. Location 398

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. Location 612

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. Location 630

The isolation of Loriane in the story and the remote setting recalls the Australian Gothic tradition. The landscape, and her lack of resources, is her enemy. The ghosts of the dead wives, those that refused or didn't withstand the wedding night ritual, create an allusion to Bluebeard and his room of dead wives, as well as to tragic Gothic ghosts.

The world of this narrative seems to be of less importance, as Loriane spends the majority of the story away from it, and this is a technique that diverges from the expectations of a steampunk story. Usually, in Steampunk narratives, the world-building is primary, as it dictates the rules that govern the actions of the characters. However, in this story, it is in the background, while the characters are more closely aligned to our shared reality. This creates a space where technology is absent in a technologically advanced world. Allowing the characters and their memories and experiences to fill the narrative space.

## Conclusion

Margo Lanagan's fiction is diverse, subtle and nuanced. It challenges expectations through its characterisations, its settings, and how it brings various genre modes, conventions, and tropes together in interesting ways. However, the blending of genres is not as simple as taking one trope or convention from science fiction and juxtaposing it with one from fantasy. Lanagan balances the shifts between genres through the characters of her stories, and it is their vividly rendered convictions and insights that carry the subtle iterations of genre through to each narrative's conclusion. In these stories, the practice of challenging and blending conventions is apparent - though not always in the manner expected. The short stories I have discussed in this thesis are a small selection of Lanagan's oeuvre, and there is significant scope for further study.

The long history of science fiction and fantasy scholarship is intertwined. The development of these areas of scholarship is closely tied to the reading and reflection on the texts by fans and critics alike. Hybridisation, as a practice, has been recognised within science fiction and fantasy for a long time, with new subgenres, blends, and iterations emerging with each generation of new writers. By bringing all these aspects together, it is possible to see how genre conventions, especially those of science fiction and fantasy, operate as a network, all linked and connected through various practises. Through this study, I have developed an understanding of how hybrid genre scholarship can add to the understanding of texts by bringing multiple streams of scholarship to bear. This multiplicity can create contradictions, which is an aspect of this process that must be carefully navigated. However, it is through these contradictions that new understanding can emerge.

While it is tempting to create new terms to label fiction with when it breaks the so-called rules, this research has shown that this does a disservice to genre theory. As texts

evolve and writers engage multiple modes, genres, and conventions to convey their narratives, the scholarship should take that as an opportunity to engage across genres, and disciplinary divides, to create a more insightful and progressive way to discuss these texts. The creative drive to blend, mix, and challenging norms is not abating, as the evolving area of science fiction and fantasy publishing shows, so the scholarship should also evolve.



## Reflection and "Synchronisation"

### Reflections on Hybrid Genre in Practice: introduction to the creative work, "Synchronisation"

This project, which has combined aspects of research, critical writing, and creative writing, has challenged my expectations about these practices. The process of completing this project has shown me that these practices are, in fact, closely linked and iterative. Through the process of conducting concurrent research and creative work, I have been led to some interesting discoveries about my process and the relationship between theory and creativity, research and writing.

My research first formed cohesion around the concept of hybrid genres and history, evidenced through the steampunk subgenre. As I mentioned in my section on Margo Lanagan's steampunk stories, I found steampunk to be one of the more developed hybrid genres. It mixes aspects of science fiction and fantasy in a way that I find extremely interesting. I was adamant I was going to write a steampunk story and that it was going to draw on history, with accuracy and integrity, while also carrying a set of characters and plots that drew on science fiction and fantasy conventions. I began a steampunk short story rooted in Australian colonial history and set explicitly in Parramatta. The process of writing this story was markedly different from the types of stories I had written before. I discovered that, while the research I was doing on automata, the mechanics and engineering practices of colonial Sydney, and Victorian England, led to some beautifully vivid episodes of my character creating a mechanical horse, I struggled to find a narrative core, a motivation for my character that resonated with me.

This problem of balancing the historical aspects I wanted to preserve, the parts I was able to shift and manipulate, and the necessity of creating a cohesive and enjoyable narrative became the jumping-off point for the next draft. I had a motif of a mechanical horse, which I had found captivating as an imaginative object. Still, in the end, I had to leave it out of the story because it wasn't serving any purpose. Its presence was almost a distraction from connecting with the character's story and their individual wants and needs. I focused in on the Female Factory of Parramatta and tried to connect my character, Claire, with the real women who had worked and resided at and near the facility. They worked at various fabric production tasks, or even heavy labour, depending on their class within the factory system. I built a narrative using that as a focus point. However, it still proved challenging to distance myself from the historical elements sufficiently to find the internal drivers of my character.

Ultimately, I returned to a style of fiction I know best and enjoyed writing, hybrid cyberpunk science fiction. The focus in my fiction is always on creating complex female protagonists. Through reading the hybrid genre fiction of Margo Lanagan so closely, by tuning in to her carefully crafted turns of phrase, I gained an appreciation for a more subtle approach to the genre. Cyberpunk is a genre from the 1980s that, like many other science fiction texts, prioritised the male perspective. When this approach is combined with a very technologically focused narrative, it adds to the false dichotomy of the male equating to technology and the female equating to culture. It is also a very blatant sort of science fiction, tied to the aesthetics of how a dystopian future might look and feel. I wanted to explore a different feeling.

In my short story "Synchronisation", I imagine a future where a specific type of cloning is possible. In this world, human bodies can be replicated and their 'consciousness' downloaded from a digitised copy. However, strict rules govern this process, and some people skirt the edges of legality for their own benefit. A more common approach to this blend of recognisable science fiction tropes (clones, digitised consciousness, oppressive government) would be to explore them coming into visual and visceral conflict. I engage with conflict at both a physical and mental level, but on the scale of the individual. It is necessary to engage with the way genre cues prime a reader's focus and attention. Still, as my study of Lanagan's texts showed, it is possible to manipulate where that focus is directed and surprise the reader through that revelation.

In undertaking this project, I have come to understand more about my writing process and how it differs between my creative and critical practices. This was an unexpected realisation and one that will be useful to explore as I pursue further research, critical and creative projects. I found that critical writing was a practice that had to be spread out over time and informed by other complementary activities that were ongoing. I found it helpful to structure my writing time in shorter units of time, with reading scheduled around it. When I engaged in my creative process, I found I needed much more isolation from other ideas. This was a considerable challenge when engaging with historical references. I can see that utilising historical touchstones in a creative project will require much more time and patience for that project to come to fruition.

This project has been an efficient exercise in exploring what works and does not work for me as a researcher and a writer. It has provided many avenues for further experimentation on how to create the best work I can. Through experimenting with a different style of fiction, I have found that I had more awareness of my voice and style than I had initially thought. In working on Margo Lanagan's short fiction, which has such a distinct voice, I have come to appreciate how much skill, experimentation, and patience that must have taken for her to create. I could not write a Margo Lanagan short story after studying her fiction, but I could find the inspiration and guidance to write my own.



## Synchronisation

I swirled through the mist as consciousness claimed me. It felt nice here, soft and warm, without weight. The distant pinpricks along my skin felt like spider feet. My nerves began to respond and flickered like fireflies. Everything warmed. I crushed my eyes closed. The spider-sensation was biting now, and hot flames licked along my feet. A deep gurgle roiled around me. Then coolness met my face, and I opened my eyes. The workshop was fish-eyed by the tube's plexiglass. The fluid was draining, and at the consoles, Biddy was flapping her hands. Her swearing was muffled by the double-walled insulation. She never swore, I thought through the brain-fog. The goo cleared, dripping down the sides, and the mesh that encased me retracted, drawing back into its sheaths, depositing me onto the floor. Then the tube opened, releasing a puff of vapour, and the recirculated air of the workshop filled my lungs.

I stepped out of the tube on shaky legs and reached for the over-bleached towel that hung next to the tube. It left red swirls on my skin as I scrubbed off the regen fluid. The tingling eased and my muscles began to respond more readily. The greasy goo had a dense, moist smell, like freshly turned earth after a rainstorm. I breathed it in deeply. A whirring from the edge of the workshop made me look up.

"Shit," said Biddy, still smacking the consoles. She swiped at the screens, not looking up, not looking at me. I watched as a tube slid out of the machine, the body in it curled and primed. Clarity crept in like daylight, slowly, then flooding bright, almost painful.

"I messed up Claire," she said. I look from her to the tube moving towards the dock, and the body spasming as its mental pattern was loaded and mapped.

"I can see that." I scrubbed the rest of the goo off through the stinging pins and needles.

"The engagement program bugged," she said, gesturing at the machine.

"And? It does that all the time." I'm watching the tube, wondering if we had been hacked. Had someone used our set up to download some mobster or something? I had heard that

the Granters had just lost their cult leader somewhere in the undercity-ether. Were they trying to restart him? Biddy rubbed her face roughly, then keyed through the console screens. The tube came to a stop, the carrier pushed it into the dock, connecting to the network of wires and needles that would condition the muscles to functional levels in about an hour.

Biddy looked up from the screen. "I can't stop it."

"Well, that's a waste of a body," I said, shuffling to the weapon rack and sliding out my favourite Five-Seven and a suppressor muzzle. "Do you know who it's downloading?" I asked, hefting the pistol in my hands, reacquainting my new body with its weight.

Biddy tapped at the screen, then the colour drained from her face.

"How bad?" My brain was clearing, focusing. It couldn't have been the Granters, too tech-phobic. Maybe the Haverlocks had broken in. That would be our luck, having them raid us to resurrect their 'immortal' god-boss.

Biddy shook her head. Her lower lip trembled.

"Worse?" I asked. I shuffled my new legs over to the console screen.

"No dummy, that's my download stats. Who's in *that*?" I said, pointing to the tube whose body was currently growing a shock of black hair.

"I don't know what it means, but that is what is downloading into that body," A beat passed. The pistol dangled from my fingers before it thunked to the ground. I grasped after it too late.

Biddy's wet eyes were strained at the edges, she'd been looking at this screen for a while.

"You said the engagement program bugged," I began.

Biddy wound her hands together, tightening them to a knot. "It seemed like a normal glitch, so I just reset it all. Then it showed two concurrent processes..." Biddy trailed off. She must have seen the recognition in my eyes. "I've tried everything I know to stop the process, tried to shut down the machines. It's all hardwired to the grid. We did that so they wouldn't know we were drawing from it..."

"It seemed like a smart idea at the time." It had been my smart idea. Tapping into the city's power network without the building infrastructure metering our load. It meant they couldn't trace our usage too. This workshop took a lot of power to run. I hadn't realised this would be the risk—no hard-power reset to save us this kind of wastage.

"What does it mean?" Biddy knotted and unknotted her hands.

"It makes no difference," I said. A bubble of regen liquid popped in my throat, and I heaved. I leaned into the tube, puking the last of the residue out.

"But if you kill her, and it's your download, isn't that like suicide?" she said.

"Just go," I said, ignoring the whimper in her voice. "You don't need to see this." I stooped to pick up the pistol, checking the magazine.

Biddy hovered.

"What?"

"You sure, you can... you know, kill her?"

"It. I can kill it. And yes, I'm sure," I said.

Biddy had always been an operator, not an agent. She had the luxury of moral conundrums. I only had time for loss management. The body would set us back fifty thousand, more, if the tube were damaged. It was the kind of loss that could wipe us out, send us to the Haverlocks for a loan we could never possibly repay. We'd be chewed up, and taken into their slum yards, bodies for their use. It would be only a little better than the Department of Bodily Affairs breaking in and smashing up our workshop, sending us to the floating prisons. There was no salvation out there.

Biddy sniffled. She knew all this, and still she asked if I had the balls to put a bullet in the body. I stretched and rolled my shoulders. Biddy opened her mouth, but no sound came out. It didn't matter who was in the body, it was a glitch, a liability, I told myself. I went to the shelves and pulled a set of clothes down. I waited and listened as Biddy's sniffles retreated upstairs. The clothes were generic, elasta-forming and clean at least. Enough to settle into this new body. The synchronisation process could take hours for a new downloader, but I had done it enough that it usually took me forty minutes or so. I checked the console screen, just enough time left to get through it. I left the pistol next to the tube with its floating body. I didn't look at it, it wouldn't have been like a mirror, but I knew the face well enough. I didn't need to see that.

My synchronisation process had been passed on by my grandmother. I had thought it was just her version of the Tai Chi other, richer grandmothers would do down at the park. She must have suspected I wasn't headed for a corporate job. I didn't have any siblings, so she had been my play companion while Mum worked.

"You're so strong," she told me. "So opinionated." I had thought these were all good things until school began to tell me otherwise. My strength wasn't the 'right' kind of strength. My opinions were never the 'right' opinions. But they felt right to me.

My grandmother was *the* body-replication researcher of her generation. Then the New Albion government had stopped all their cloning programs, there was no need for them, no reason to try to better a twenty per cent chance of success. The world had been crashing financially, and no one knew how to save it. They had banned her life's work. Her notebooks said she went to Singapore, then India. Russia had tried to lure her, but ultimately, she ended up on a research vessel that would circulate around the Antarctic, occasionally docking in New Albion. She would stay with us for a few weeks before heading off again. She never said if she was working on the ship. Mum said she was always working. Didn't know how to stop. I guess that ran in the family.

When she stayed with us, I remember skipping school to stay home with her. I would walk down the road, and hide behind the bus shelter, waiting for my mother to drive away. Then I would run back, bursting into the house. Gran would be out the back. On our small ledge of grass. Her blend of dance choreography, martial arts, and recitation of mantras had seemed a strange ritual. But they were soothing, I watched her each morning, and begrudgingly she showed me. She taught me how to breathe in and out through the movements. She showed me which ones were the pushing ones, and which ones pulled. She pinched bits of me that dipped or slipped out of alignment. It stuck in my head like a Christmas carol. She had shown me all her notebooks, the veiled history behind her scribbling. Then one time she went to sea and never returned. My mother wondered if the Russians finally got to her, but by then the world had settled into a collective stalemate, everyone just hoarding the resources they had. No one had the upper hand over anyone else. I knew she had not meant to come back because she left all her notebooks behind.

It had been my first download when I realised how my grandmother had conditioned me with the perfect synchronisation routine. I emerged from the tank, still gripping my stomach where I had been shot. Zeph had sniggered but held out the towel.

"You'll feel better once you sync up," he had said. He had taken me to the mats and started taking me through the movements. Squats, punches, stretches, with some drumming music playing. We were an hour in when I stopped him. My body was still tingling from memory-pain.

"I have a better way," I said. I knew it would work. Zeph hadn't believed me.

"You have to realign your entire mind and body, there are no shortcuts," he said. He was assuming I had watched all the vids on the topic, with avatars spruiking their latest and greatest sync meditation tracks. "It has to be physical and mental; it has to intersect."

"I know." I moved a few feet away and closed my eyes. I began the motions and movements as my grandmother had taught me. It took a few runs the first time, to remember all the breathing and foot positions, get the mantras aligned to the breaths. But by the end, Zeph was nodding. I returned to stillness, feeling full and present in the new body.

"Where'd you get that from?" he asked when I had finished.

"Just a family trick," I said. Zeph maybe suspected, but we didn't discuss family or pasts here. It wasn't our style. We had depended on each other, but only in the here and now. If no one shared their secrets, we had nothing to hold over each other, and nothing to make us vulnerable.

The tube puffed. I returned to stillness. The body stepping out of the tube reached for a towel. There wasn't one there. She looked around, hunched over, gripping the floor with her toes. I wondered if that was really how I looked coming out of the tubes. I picked up the pistol. Her eyes locked on mine as I raised it to her head. I stood to the side of the tube, the bullet would have cleaved straight through the skull, missing the rest of the setup. A flash of light crossed my eyes, searing, stinging. I squeezed.

*What are you doing?*

Her hand darted up, grabbed my forearm, pushing the pistol wide before it could bite. The shot fired into the tube, puncturing the tank, and making the last of the regen fluid fizz. *Shit, that's twenty thou' gone*, I thought. I pulled my hand back, down, breaking from her grip. She flipped her hand around, bringing both to the top of my arm and pushing down. The pistol pointed at the floor between us now, and she was pinning my arms, the way I would if someone were trying to shoot me. *You're in my head*, I thought. Twisting and testing her, testing my grip.

"Yes, I am," she said. Her voice, my voice, sent a shockwave through me. My heart fluttered. *You have to die*, I thought. Reminding myself that I'm me, that her body was just a duplicate, an expensive mistake. Zeph would be furious. I had to cut our losses.

*But I/you don't want to.* She thought to me. I tried to not think as I stepped back, dropping away from her pressure. She pre-empted me, stepped with me. We pivoted, her sliding her hands around my wrists, while I tried to circle the pistol around to her chest. She blocked, then we locked our arms together, bent and pointing to the ceiling.

"How is this even possible," I said. No one had reported anything like this happening before, even when people had doubled themselves. No one had ever developed spontaneous telepathy. Surely there would be some report if they had. I had never thought to search for psychic clones because the idea was simply absurd.

"No one, except us," she said, responding to my muddled thoughts. We were working against each other, I was pulling my arms up, and she was pushing them down. Even unsynchronised she was my match for strength. It was too much of a liability.

*We're smart,* she thought to me. I couldn't be sure if it was my imagination or hers then. The images muddle in my brain, some appearing unprompted, and some rising out of my deep depths of memory. *Change my hair, make sure we wear different styles, different colours. It's so absurd that people would rather believe in long lost twins, rather than doubled clones.* Was it my idea or hers? We locked eyes, and I see a strange glow around the edge of her iris. Bioluminescence, like algae, as our thoughts tumbled over each other. Already deviating though, shifting, becoming unique patterns. I wondered if my eyes were doing the same. A reflected image blurred in my mind. Yes. She sent her view of me. Where her irises glowed golden yellow, mine was silvery. I had avoided my reflection for so long, this reflection wasn't even a reflection. It was my face, flipped, how others saw it. I blinked hard, shifting the image away.

My double seemed to realise something then. She untwisted our arms and stepped back. My grip on the pistol was still firm, and I held it out, pointed at her forehead. She waited. I waited. It was the same thing. *I have to,* I thought. *We can't weather this kind of violation. We'll be found out for sure. The Department of Bodily Affairs, their cameras, their agents are everywhere. They'd notice. We would both be hunted.* If not for me, then I had to kill her for Biddy and Zeph, I couldn't ask them to carry this truth. We'd never be able to trust anyone outside us. We would have to trust each other. Then again, did I have to? My double stood, at ease, her hands clasped behind her back waiting. Cocky, of course, she knew. I knew. My double leaned forward; hands pressed into thighs. She coughed, throwing up the last of her regen fluid.

"Guess you need to rename yourself," I said. I found my discarded towel, and though it was slightly damp, it would do. I handed it to her.

"We always wanted to do a rebrand," she said. I thought through all the ways I had reimagined myself over the years. Between the two of us we could be the strong opinionated girl our grandmother had seen.

"From now on, we've got to treat you as separate," I said. Our minds tumbled through the same thoughts. It would take us some time to develop far enough from this moment for our brain patterns to be discernible. She walked to the shelf and slid out a clean set of clothes. I joined her on the mat. She had me snookered. I had snookered myself. My arms dipped, and I flicked the pistol's safety on. A long shuddering breath left my body.



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