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Biases in Science Fiction and Fantasy Novels

This text examines how personal biases stemming from individual backgrounds influence both the creation and reception of literature, highlighting that writers inevitably reflect their own experiences and biases in their work, which can then interact with the biases of readers and affect their interpretation of the text.



Beyond the Horizon: A Glimpse into the Future. In a world where technology merges with humanity, one man faces the complexities of a future defined by both the promises and perils of advanced innovation.

Everyone has at least one bias, but more often than not, people have more than one bias. These biases stem from the way a person is raised and the environment they are raised in as they grow up. In an interview conducted by Brit Mandelo, Elizabeth Bear says, "I grew up in the wrong household, I'm afraid, to have an excellent idea of the prevalence of straight white males in years past, as the books around the house had a

heavy bias towards female and queer authors, and authors of color" (Mandelo). Biases lead to people's views being tainted and their words, actions, and deeds reflecting their biases.

Writers have biases. When they write, their biases are reflected in their writing. Bear says, "...What I write reflects the world I know" (Mandelo). Writers want their works to be read, but they also want to be true to themselves and write what is in their hearts. Writing is an endeavor of love and hard work. Jean Cocteau writes, "To write, to conquer ink and paper, accumulate letters and paragraphs, divide them with periods and commas, is different from carrying around the dream of a play or a book" (Cocteau 79-80). The essence of who the writer is will fill the pages of their novel. Henry Miller states that writing is a voyage of discovery, a way of looking at the universe. He writes, "The writer lives between the upper and lower worlds: he takes the path in order eventually to become that path himself" (Miller). This path and discovery leads writers to write what they feel will best help and entertain the world, including biases. Readers have biases, too. When they read a book, their biases cause them to judge the book, the characters, the writer, and the writing of the book. Biases color the reading and writing of novels.

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*Katherine Addison's novel, *The Goblin Emperor*, looks at racial and political biases through the eyes of a young emperor of the wrong race who must learn how to lead an empire, adjust to their customs, and obey the rules of the land while coming of age. As one reads *The Goblin Emperor*, one will notice that the book is about an undesirable young man who is of royal descent, but because he is a half-breed. He is mistreated and mistrusted of the wrong ethnicity, a goblin instead of an elf. He faces many biases as he assumes the throne that the death of his father and family has left vacant. There are racial biases because Maia is a goblin instead of an elf. There are political biases because he does not know anything about social graces and politics, having lived in a remote area. In the passage below, Addison shows the court's bias towards the mysticism that Maia uses to calm himself down. Maia needs to chant to calm himself down, but he cannot do it aloud because the people in the court may laugh and ridicule him.*

"The court would not care for a mystically minded emperor; they might well take it as proof that Varenechibel's bitter calumnies had been true. Perhaps we can meditate with one another in the room? He offered, aware of his doubtful tone like a man offering a screaming child a sweet. Cala would not laugh, nor

would scorn thee nor bear tales. But he could not imagine it. He settled himself, inhaled deeply, exhaled, and began the patient contemplation of his breathing again. His mother had taught him a prayer that could be used as a mantra: *Cstheio Caireizhasan, hear me. Cstheio Caireizhasan, see me. Cstheio Caireizhasan, know me. One did not ask for more than awareness from the Lady of the Stars; hers was the gift of clear sight, not mercy or protection*" (Addison 233-234).

Discussing race and ethnicity in Science Fiction and Fantasy is a good thing. In a round table interview conducted by Zachary Jernigan, Aliette de Bodard remarks that writing about race in genre fiction is a good thing and a bad thing. She first comments on the good thing about writing about race and then the wrong thing.

"...As I said above, the good one is that there are fewer preconceptions and that people will be more disposed to listen and less encumbered by prejudice. As a writer, I am also free to make up history and context, allowing me a wider range of situations than if I were writing mainstream fiction set in a particular place and time. It is also a bad thing, I think, precisely because of the wider freedom: it's all too easy to create problematic representations (erasing entire populations in future histories, for instance), and it's also all too easy for the reader to think of the racial representations in the genre as something that doesn't apply to the real world-to remain firmly in escapist land and to think that the problems faced by, say, Black people in a secondary fantasy, or Asians in an urban fantasy in which cities have a vampire court and several packs of werewolves, have nothing to do with real life, precisely because of the presence of the fantastical or science fictional elements" (Jernigan).

Writers must continue to write from their heart, and if their writings discuss and cover various biases, then it is good for them because by doing so, they may help readers overcome their biases.

*Susan Beth Pfeffer's book, *The Dead and the Gone* looks at the life of a 17-year-old Hispanic young man who has to take care of his sisters after their parents come up missing after an asteroid hits the moon and sends it out of orbit, placing it too close to Earth. This calamity causes the Earth to experience a variety of natural disasters, famine, and diseases that kill many people. Alex has to do several things that go against his Catholic faith so that he and his two sisters can survive. The book examines how religion affects a young man trying to protect his sisters and remain faithful to the religion he believes to be correct. Pfeffer's book could have been a mesmerizing and graphic tale about a life of pandemonium. Still, it is a glossed-over tale about a saintly teenager filled with an overload of religion. The passage below shows how Alex's faith is in flux as he decides to steal food from a vacant apartment building. He finds an apartment, rings the doorbell,*

and waits to see if anyone comes to the door. After surmising that the apartment was vacant, he and his sisters raided the apartment for food. They find enough food to live on for a few weeks.

"...Alex didn't want to, either, since the only thing he'd eaten all day was half a can of chicken noodle soup, with half a can of mushrooms promised by Julie for supper. "Wait a second," he said and walked to his bedroom. He lifted the mattress from the upper bunk bed and pulled out the two envelopes that held keys for apartment 11F and apartment 14J. If neither of them had ever returned, they'd not tried to contact Papi. And if they hadn't come back, food might be wasted. Was it stealing? Was it a sin? Alex thought it might be both. But Christ wouldn't want them to starve when there was food available. He walked back into the living room, his hands shaking with excitement. There was no time to waste since the electricity came and went.

...What seemed like much food now would dwindle to nothing in weeks. All he was doing was postponing the inevitable, not that he knew what the inevitable would be. He finished loading the garbage bags into the shopping cart and said a quick thank-you to 11F and Christ for the food that would keep them alive that much longer. He dragged the cart into the hallway, relieved no one had noticed, and found Julie standing by the service elevator, keeping the door open" (Pfeffer 111-112, 115).

Many biases influence writers, readers, and publishers regarding Science Fiction, Fantasy, and genre novels. These biases should not be considered when an author is trying to market their book, but they are. Ann Aguirre writes, "I am a woman. I write SF. And it's not acceptable to treat me as anything less than an equal. I won't stand for it. And I won't get your fucking coffee" (Aguirre). Biases can cause one to miss out on a good book. Taking an honest and open look at biases in a novel can be a good thing. In his interview with Zachary Jernigan and David Anthony Durham, they summed up the potential good of discussing biases in novels.

"...One is that so much awesomeness is found in hanging out with folks who are not like you. I remember from reading mainstream world literature in college how exciting it was to get bombarded by different perspectives and the storytelling verve coming out of different traditions. Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe: writers from these places smacked me with new ideas. I loved them for it" (Jernigan).

Writing is a creative venture into sharing one's heart with the world, it is a complicate endeavor for the writer. Further complicating things are the biases that the author has. Carefully navigating through writing a novel that will be judged for its own merits can be treacherous, with the author being criticized for what they did and did not include in their book. Also hindering an author is the biases they may face, from gender, racial, and sexual biases. Writers must continue to write from their heart, and if their writings discuss and cover various biases, then it is good for them because by doing so, they may help readers overcome their biases.

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