

Books & arts



KERRY BROWN/PARAMOUNT/EVERETT COLLECTION

In the film *Terminator: Dark Fate*, Linda Hamilton plays Sarah Connor as an older woman — a demographic that's rarer in science-fiction novels.

Space ageing: where are the galactic grandmas?

The lack of older women in sci-fi novels reflects and reifies ageism and sexism. **By Sylvia Spruck Wrigley**

As women get old, they gain a superpower: invisibility. And not only in real life. 'Young adult' fantasy and science-fiction hits such as Suzanne Collins's novel series *The Hunger Games* and Stephenie Meyers's *Twilight* series have been taken to task for doing away with

mature women. In fantasy generally, older women mainly occupy supporting roles, such as fairy godmothers, wise crones and evil witches. The best are subversions — George R. R. Martin's *Queen of Thorns* in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, for instance, or Terry Pratchett's wonderful *Granny Weatherwax* and *Nanny Ogg* in

the *Discworld* series. All of them embrace old age with gusto.

I expected better from science-fiction novels, where alternative worlds and alien nations explore what it means to be human. In 1976, after all, Ursula K. Le Guin argued in her essay 'The Space Crone' that post-menopausal women are best suited to representing the human race to alien species, because they are the most likely to have experienced all the changes of the human condition. And Robert A. Heinlein offers a fantastic galactic grandmother in *The Rolling Stones* (1952): Hazel Stone, engineer, lunar colonist and expert blackjack player irritated by the everyday misogyny of the Solar System.

Over the past year, with support from such authors and readers all over the world, I've searched for competent, witty female elders in major roles in sci-fi novels. I found no shortage



In Stephen King's *The Stand*, Abigail Freemantle becomes a spiritual leader as a centenarian.

of fantastic female characters across the genre, from the gynocentric utopians of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 *Herland* to mathematician Elma York in Mary Robinette Kowal's 2018 *The Calculating Stars*. But I have so far confirmed just 36 English-language novels in the genre that feature old women as major figures. The earliest is Gertrude Atherton's 1923 *Black Oxen*; the latest, from 2018, are *Blackfish City* by Sam J. Miller and *Record of a Spaceborn Few* by Becky Chambers.

Experience gap

It's a notable gap. Old men with deep expertise and experience throng sci-fi, from ancient keeper to eccentric mentor, retired badass and wasteland elder. And non-binary gender possibilities are explored in books such as Octavia

Butler's 1987 *Dawn* and Kameron Hurley's *The Mirror Empire* (2014).

Over the past century, women in the real world have been increasingly likely to become researchers, doctors and engineers. Indeed, most fields in science, technology, engineering and mathematics now recruit a growing proportion of women. But women are still under-represented among senior scientists, owing to the 'leaky pipeline' – they leave the field disproportionately in response to systemic bias.

And science fiction has magnified that issue. Rather than countering bias against ageing women, sci-fi writers seem more interested in making them young again – even expediting the rejuvenation process by casting it as a modern convenience akin to jet packs and

replicators. Yet again, only a few of the novels I found featuring technological fountains of youth include old women. Paula Myo in Peter Hamilton's *Commonwealth Saga* (2004) and Sarah Halifax in Robert Sawyer's *Rollback* (2007), for example, consider the side effects of gaining life experience without apparent ageing. John Scalzi's *Old Man's War* (2005) is a thought-provoking parody of the 'body-snatching' trope, in which a new body is taken to replace a worn one, showing the psychological perils of renewal that's only skin-deep.

“Rather than countering bias against ageing women, sci-fi writers seem more interested in making them young again.”

Age-reversal technology should apply to all genders: why would anyone get physically old if they didn't have to? And yet, amid the fictional horde of seasoned male mentors and stewards, sci-fi authors struggle to imagine a similar function for aged women.

All this reflects a general societal reluctance to see ageing as a natural process. The global anti-ageing market is currently worth more than US\$50 billion, mainly targeting women aged 35 to 55 in a kind of heckling by advertisement. Many women are reluctant to describe themselves as elderly from fear of stereotypes that define older women as isolated and fragile. If a woman is smart and social and competent, the stereotypes say, she must not be old.

Double dearth

I found a clear lack of cultural diversity in the female elders of sci-fi, almost as if there's a quota. Even when I focused on Afrofuturism, searching the works of Butler and fellow pioneer Samuel R. Delany, I found older women of colour only in short stories and fantasy novels. Many point to Le Guin's anarchist leader Laia Asieo Odo. However, Odo is middle-aged when described in *The Dispossessed* (1974), and old (and nearing death) only in the short story 'The Day Before the Revolution'. Similarly, Essun of N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy is in her forties. I discovered just one major character who met all the criteria: Mother Abigail from Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978).

UK sci-fi authors, I found, consistently portray only white old women as British. Women of colour are always described as coming from other countries or realms; I have noted no representation of actual UK diversity. US writers have a similar record, with one exception. Three female elders from Native nations feature prominently in novels:

Masaaraq from *Blackfish City*; Jenny Casey from Elizabeth Bear's *Hammered* (2004); and Kris Longknife in the eponymous series by Mike Shepherd.

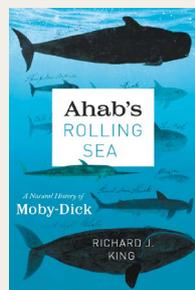
Celibacy is another distinguishing feature of the few female elders there are in sci-fi – despite studies showing that around half of women over 40 (including a significant number of over-80s) are sexually active and satisfied (S. E. Trompeter *et al. Am. J. Med.* **125**, 37–43.e1; 2012). Madame Zattiany of *Black Oxen*, for instance, remains uninterested in sex despite a glandular 'rejuvenation' that leads to an affair with a much younger man. (Despite the lack of libido, it is her inability to bear children that dooms the relationship.) Interestingly, the elderly female characters who show any interest in sex are clearly defined as lesbian or bisexual, such as the killer-whale-riding warrior grandmother in *Blackfish City*. As for menopause, it is glossed over in the qualifying books, in sharp contrast to the prevalence of puberty-related tales. That is a definite reflection of the dearth of research around menopause, and of support for women undergoing it.

I have shared my data through an open mailing list, and asked for input at presentations at major sci-fi conferences in Europe. Recently, I received an e-mail asking why I expected 'croners' to appear in sci-fi at all. Shouldn't youth take centre stage, the author asked, with the added advantage of romantic potential? This summarizes the attitude that, after a certain age, women are uninteresting or threatening – and need to be got out of the way. More than 20% of US citizens will be 65 or over by 2035. The real-world grey tsunami cannot be halted. It could be considered a blessing, if we were to collectively focus on the strengths of older people, and foster healthspan as well as lifespan.

The wise old crone might not be a useful trope. However, science fiction could and should explore new roles for female elders as multifaceted beings. Authors have an opportunity here. With so few venerable women in major roles, a single novel including a new manifestation (say, a crime-solving octogenarian tribble rancher or a trans woman over 50) could completely change the landscape. Grandma is marvellous already; she doesn't need to look like a teenager.

Sylvia Spruck Wrigley is a speculative-fiction author and independent scholar based in Tallinn, who was nominated for a Nebula Award in 2014. Her short stories have been translated into more than a dozen languages. She is co-author of *The Triangle*, an audiobook production for the app Serial Box, set in the Bermuda Triangle. Find out more about her work on Old Women in Science Fiction by joining the mailing list at <https://intrigue.co.uk>. e-mail: sylvia@intrigue.co.uk

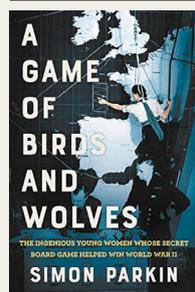
Books in brief



Ahab's Rolling Sea

Richard J. King Univ. Chicago Press (2019)

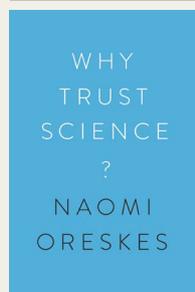
Herman Melville's sprawling masterpiece *Moby-Dick* (1851) is a fictional feat studded with empirical evidence, reveals maritime historian Richard King in this invigorating study. King traces references to ethology, meteorology, marine microbiota and the oceans to Melville's sailing experience in the Pacific and wranglings with the works of scientists William Scoresby, Louis Agassiz and others. *Moby-Dick*, King boldly avers, is a "proto-Darwinian fable" – and its beleaguered narrator, Ishmael, an early environmentalist.



A Game of Birds and Wolves

Simon Parkin Sceptre (2019)

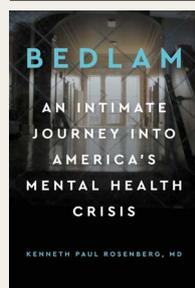
Did gaming win the Second World War? In this stirring history, Simon Parkin recounts how eight mathematically minded members of the UK Women's Royal Naval Service, with retired captain Gilbert Roberts, aimed to crack the tactics of Germany's notorious U-boats through war games. Playing large-scale Battleship on the floor of a Liverpool office, the team's 'Operation Raspberry' was decisive in winning the Battle of the Atlantic. Parkin's account redresses a balance: none in this doughty sisterhood has ever been publicly honoured.



Why Trust Science?

Naomi Oreskes Princeton Univ. Press (2019)

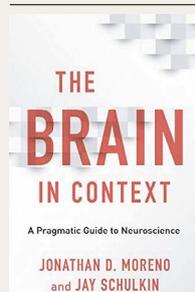
As some sectors of society reject expertise on issues such as vaccination, science historian Naomi Oreskes explores what makes science trustworthy. This concise volume – comprising her 2016 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton University in New Jersey, along with commentary by experts – is a bracing exploration of philosophy of science and a demonstration of her vigorous engagement with the topic. We trust science, she reminds us, because consensus is a crucial indicator of truth – and "objectivity is maximised" through diversity.



Bedlam

Kenneth Paul Rosenberg Avery (2019)

Psychiatrist Kenneth Rosenberg has been at the front lines of mental illness since the 1980s, when US psychiatric-hospital closures forced many people with serious mental conditions onto the streets or into prisons: some jails now 'warehouse' thousands. He meshes research with an analysis of systemic failures and personal stories, including those of psychiatrist Elyn Saks and his own sister, both diagnosed with schizophrenia. His ultimately hopeful study highlights key steps for patients, from details on integrated care to US legal advice.



The Brain in Context

Jonathan D. Moreno and Jay Schulkin Columbia Univ. Press (2019)

That fatty mass in the skull is not all there is to the brain – neural tissue lurks all over the body. So bioethicist Jonathan Moreno and neuroscientist Jay Schulkin begin their guide to neurology. To "see the brain in its wholeness", they examine the historical interplay of experiment and theory through lenses from comparative structure to evolution and imaging. The result is fascinating, whether on 'brains in a dish' or BrainGate technology to help people with paralysis control their limbs; but factual logjams impede the flow at times. **Barbara Kiser**