

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

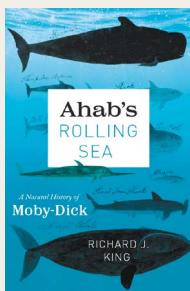
Celibacy is another distinguishing feature of the few female elders there are in sci-fi – despite studies showing that around half of women over 40 (including a significant number of over-80s) are sexually active and satisfied (S.E. Trompeter *et al.* *Am.J.Med.* **125**, 37–43.e1; 2012). Madame Zattiany 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 ‘crones’ 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.

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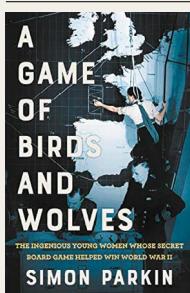
## Books in brief



### Ahab's Rolling Sea

Richard J. King Univ. Chicago Press (2019)

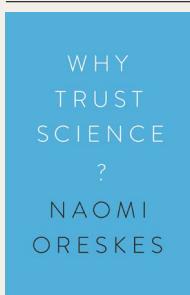
Herman Melville's sprawling masterpiece *Moby-Dick* (1851) is a fictional feat studded with empirical evidence, reveals maritime historian Richard King in this invigorating study. King traces references to ethology, meteorology, marine microbiota and the oceans to Melville's sailing experience in the 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)

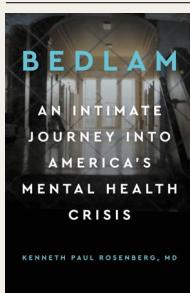
Did gaming win the Second World War? In this stirring history, Simon Parkin recounts how eight mathematically minded members of the UK Women's Royal Naval Service, with retired captain Gilbert Roberts, aimed to crack the tactics of Germany's notorious U-boats through war games. Playing large-scale Battleship 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)

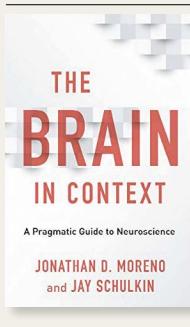
As some sectors of society reject expertise on issues such as vaccination, science historian Naomi Oreskes explores what makes science trustworthy. This concise volume — comprising her 2016 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton University in New Jersey, along with commentary by experts — is a 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**