

### Discussion on the 2022 Nebula Nominees for Best Novel



#### The Editorial Collective

*This discussion concerns four of the six nominees for the award. The winner, *Babel*, is not discussed here, *Four of us* chose a nominee, read it, answered some of the questions below and then used these answers as the jumping-off point for why these works in particular were nominated by scholars and critics as among the best SF novels of last year.*

#### Summarize the Plot in a Paragraph or Two:

**Virginia Conn:** *Nona the Ninth* is the third novel in Tamsyn Muir's Locked Tomb series (originally slated to be a trilogy, the snippet that became *Nona* took on a life of its own—something Muir's fans will be both completely unsurprised and equally completely delighted by). Writing a summary of the story without giving away spoilers for the first two books is a challenge, but the story revolves around *Nona*, a girl (??) almost literally born yesterday, and the attempts of three of the previous novels' surviving (???) characters to assess who she really is while also surviving the encroaching onslaught of god's (John, an immortal techbro who destroyed all life in the solar system ten thousand years ago in the pursuit of saving the Earth from climate change and human abuse) army; the inconceivably powerful resurrection beasts subsequently unleashed by John's necromancy; and the forces of an insurgency group loosely united against necromancy, Blood of Eden. Unlike the previous two novels, which focused primarily on John's hand-picked lyctors (immortal necromancers created through the fusion of a necromancer and his/her/their cavalier), *NtN* deals more with the day-to-day life of a city under occupation by forces it has no hope of opposing. In doing so, it much more fully fleshes out (heh) the rest of the Locked Tomb universe outside of god's handpicked cohort. It also features the return of Ianthe (iykyk).

**Dominick Grace:** *Nettle and Bone* begins with Princess Marra working on completing the second of three impossible tasks, the creation of a bone dog, by wiring together bones from a diverse array of dogs and magically animating them. We learn that she has been given three tasks in order to get help in completing her quest to kill her sister's husband, Prince Vorling, who (probably; it is never confirmed) murdered his first wife, Marra's eldest sister, and is abusing his second wife, Marra's other sister (Marra, of course, is the youngest of three siblings and has

an essentially absent father). We learn that she has been in a nunnery for half her life (she is about thirty) but sets out to kill the prince to save her sister, and possibly herself from being the next married off to him. Along the way, she acquires the standard motley crew of assistance: the bone dog, a dust-wife (a magically-empowered woman who can commune with the dead—and who has a demon-possessed chicken), Fenris (a warrior), and Agnes (a fairy godmother, and Mara's great aunt). They must trek to the unimaginatively-named Northern Kingdom (we also have the Harbor Kingdom—it has a harbor—and the Southern Kingdom) and then get into the castle to achieve their quest. Will they succeed? Well, how do fairy tales, even revisionist ones, usually work out?

**Ian Campbell:** The quite short *Spear* is a retelling of the Sir Percival legend from the Arthurian tales. It's still a quest for the Holy Grail, among other things, but it's very different from the usual run of Arthurian stories in several ways: it's told in first person; it's entirely pagan, it emphasizes the Celtic origin of the Arthurian stories; it's queer or has been queered, and involves a lot of gender play; and its protagonist is a woman who spends a good chunk of the book in drag. It's clear if you know your Arthurian legends in detail that Griffith has done her homework, and this makes a real difference: for all the changes to the most common version(s) of the legend she makes, they ring true. Peredur ("hard-spear", Percival's original name) is the daughter of a witch-woman who keeps her sequestered from the world, but Peredur has to grow up and leave, exposing herself and her mother to great danger from her father, a powerful faerie. She disguises herself as a man, performs daring deeds, is invited to Arthur's court and is accepted as one of the knights. Subsequently, she meets Nimuë, the muse/apprentice of Merlin, who in this telling is misusing the faerie artifacts Sword and Stone to gain power for himself, though by the time the action begins, Nimuë has neutralized him. Peredur and Nimuë go on a quest to resolve these and other issues. During this quest, Peredur finds out that the faerie is her father: she takes the titular Spear (another powerful artifact) from him and kills him with it, then uses the Grail, which had been in her mother's possession all along, to bring Nimuë back from the brink of death.

**Michael Pitts:** *The Mountain in the Sea* considers perennial questions surrounding consciousness and interspecies communication. The narrative follows Dr. Ha Nguyen, a cephalopod scientist tasked with establishing communication with a colony of octopi demonstrating considerable skill in making and using tools;

organizing their increasingly complex community; communicating with each other via symbols produced by their chromatophores, the specialized skin cells which alter an octopus's skin's color, reflectivity, and opacity; and killing humans they perceive to be a threat. Working for DIANIMA, a tech conglomerate with various subsidiaries and particular investments in AI production, Dr. Nguyen is aided by Evrim, a genderless android controversially produced by the corporation, and Altantsetseg, a security officer assigned to the project. Spliced into the novel are two other subplots: one follows Rustem, a Russian hacker who accepts a job offered by a mysterious organization to hack into a mind for an undisclosed reason. The other secondary narrative focuses upon Eiko, a Japanese man who, immediately upon relocating to the Ho Chi Minh Autonomous Trade Zone to seek a job at DIANIMA, is abducted and enslaved upon a fishing boat operated by AI.

### **What is the Novel Estranging, or Attempting to Do?**

**Virginia:** What isn't *Nona the Ninth* estranging? Religion (primarily, but not exclusively, Catholicism), familial relationships, romantic relationships, sex, gender, The Chosen One narrative, space operas themselves, what a dog is, etc. Anything that seems like it's initially being played straight, well, it simply isn't (there's a queer joke in there).

**Dominick:** *Nettle and Bone* is clearly rooted in fairy tales, long before Kingfisher gilds the lily by having the characters themselves comment on what kind of story they are in:

“So you built yourself a dog and found yourself a wolf. If a fox shows up looking for you, we'll have a proper fairy tale and I'll start to worry.”

“Why?” asked Marra. “If I'm in a fairy tale, I might actually have a chance.”

“Fairy tales,” said the dust-wife heavily, “are very hard on bystanders. Particularly old women. I'd rather not dance myself to death in iron shoes, if it's all the same to you.” (98)

Revisionist fairy tales are not new, nor are ones that take a feminist slant on this generally very patriarchal form. Kingfisher makes the basis of the action the abuse of women, which is a common fairy tale trope, as the above quotation acknowledges. Figures that tend to get a bad rap in fairy tales, such as old women

with power/authority, are recentred here in protagonist roles. The resolution of the novel depends on that fairy tale standby of a curse issued by a fairy godmother, but whereas usually said fairy godmother is wicked, the opposite is true here. Kingfisher humanizes the often-demonized models of female power and authority typically found in fairy tales, notably the wicked witch. The novel can therefore be said to be critiquing the normative fairy tale model, and using fairy tale devices to critique violence against women.

**Ian:** Implicitly, *Spear* estranges how much is grafted onto stories to make them palatable to their audiences. *The Morte d'Arthur* cycle is essentially entirely masculine, and (depending on which version you're reading) women are either largely absent, largely symbolic or manipulative figures of evil (e.g., *The Once and Future King*). The usual legends are resolutely heteronormative, so much so that there aren't even queer *villains*. And of course, they've had all this Christianity grafted onto them, even though it's highly questionable whether whatever historical figures these legends might have originally been based on would even have heard of Christianity. The story is just as powerful (and frankly, more persuasive) as a pagan story than a Christian one. So while Griffith isn't nearly clumsy enough to tell us what she's doing, she's clearly trying to a story that rings truer to its original sources, and by introducing "new" factors like queer content, is arguing that whatever might have been queer in history or the original legend was taken out by subsequent writers.

**Michael:** *Mountain* is at times philosophical and, in other moments, reminiscent of early pulp stories. The narrative's exotic location, an island of the Con Dao archipelago, the mysterious nature of DIANIMA and its creative if not financial leader, Dr. Arnkatla Mínerudóttir-Chan, the anonymous and murderous group enlisting the help of Rustem, the use of new technologies to spy and assassinate victims including a deadly robotic winged insect, and the passages in which octopi violently dispatch their human victims all fit within the boundaries of early pulp stories.

On the other hand, *The Mountain in the Sea* dives into questions of consciousness and communication, setting it apart from such earlier works. Concerning the former topic, it centers questions related to the consciousness of robotic life, mainstays of the speculative genre. However, after dispatching with this issue with the reasoning that any being—synthetic or organic—that is aware

of themselves is conscious (or, as Ha puts it—riffing on Descartes—“I think, therefore I doubt I am”), the narrative considers more unique questions concerning consciousness and interspecies communication. In parallel narrative threads, Ha, in her quest to communicate with the octopi, realizes that such communication requires an understanding of the conscious experiences of the cephalopod, whose genetic makeup and anatomy are so distinct from that of humans. Simultaneously, Rustem, seeking to penetrate a synthetic mind, is similarly tasked with the work of understanding its uniquely unhuman qualities, a project that ultimately produces in him, as in Ha, a radical empathy and desire to communicate with the other being scrutinized. While Nayler does at times, then, tread familiar generic territory, his interest in the nature of consciousness and its influence upon avenues of interspecies communication greatly enriches his novel.

### **Why Do You Think the Novel was Nominated?**

**Virginia:** There are many reasons why I think *Nona the Ninth* was nominated, but first and foremost among them is probably the characteristic that makes it most divisive to readers—its use of language. It’s rare to read something where the author is so clearly having *fun* with her use of language in the way Muir is here, and this approach requires an enormous amount of skill in recognizing the perfect moment to deploy a deeply estranging anachronism. Muir’s prose relies on the use of obsolete memes and slang (somewhat lampshaded by the fact that many of the characters achieved immortality in our present, and have just been bopping around the galaxy in the ten thousand years that have passed since then), almost brutal cheerfulness, and a self-awareness that occasionally veers into a tongue-in-cheek transgression of the fourth wall. It has been described (by the LA Review of Books and NPR, among others) as having a particularly “millennial sensibility,” while Muir herself has noted that the late 90s-early 00s internet culture she draws on informs her foregrounding of the artifice of language. That is, she’s using cultural touchstones and language as a tool that acknowledges its own worldbuilding capacity in the very process of being deployed. This linguistic playfulness certainly isn’t for everyone, but Muir isn’t writing for everyone—she’s writing for (affectionately) tumblr lesbians with daddy issues, and in terms of tone, discursal expectations, and references, she absolutely nails it.

**Dominick:** I am honestly not sure why *Nettle and Bone* was nominated, though T. Kingfisher does seem to rack up a lot of awards and nominations. While I found many of its elements interesting and engaging—the bone dog, the concept of the dust-wife, the possessed chicken (!) and others—I never got a sense of inhabiting a really fleshed-out world. As the kingdom names suggest, we are basically in a generic fairy-tale world, which works fine in a short fairy tale but not so well in a novel, even a short one. The characters are of course based in fairy tale types, but apart from Marra, we get little to no sense of complexity or an inner life. Marra’s naivety and lack of confidence, often descending almost into self-hatred, does speak effectively to the novel’s interest in how women can be brutalized psychologically as well as physically. However, I am not sure that this novel really achieves much, or anything, that other writers have not already managed. Its normalizing of the magical and much of its tone is Gaimanesque, and its willingness to acknowledge and present harsh violence (though the novel avoids any sort of explicit sexual detail, aiming instead for romantic longing until the end and then demurely closing the curtain) is also not new to heroic fantasy. Its writing is fine, but the dialogue rarely sounds different from how the typical person in twenty-first America would talk, and occasionally really clangs, as when Marra channels Keanu Reeves by reacting to a surprising site (not a typo) with a “Whoa.” For me, this was an enjoyable read that was neither stylistically nor thematically distinct enough for it to rise enough above the average to be one of the best SF/Fantasy books published in 2022. But then, I haven’t read many of the others.

**Ian:** Mostly, because *Spear* is actually good. It’s well-constructed, finely honed, doesn’t use 21<sup>st</sup>-century anachronistic language like so much other Fantasy Dreck, and it makes for a better Percival legend than nearly all of the dozens and dozens of other versions going way back before the *Morte d’Arthur* stories. It’s also fashionable, to have a lot of queer content, and *Spear* does it much, much better than most of the rest of what I’ve read directly. I think it deserved the nomination because it’s very good without being bombastic, overwrought or overlong. This past year was kind of a down year for the genre in my opinion, and in a better year it might have been an honorable mention rather than a nominee, but it would still be close enough that nominating it would remain plausible.

**Michael:** I offer that *Mountain* was nominated due to this philosophical dimension of it, which is complimented by the cast of characters populating the story. These characters, each possessing rounded features and explored

motives and desires, shapes the narrative's themes of communication, mostly as it relates to community. Balancing its exploration of possible communication and connection between humankind and octopi, the narrative cleverly explores its human characters' desires and need to connect with others. Avoiding tendencies to either demonize or glorify AI, *The Mountain in the Sea* posits that synthetic life may act to either hinder or enable such connections. In the case of the simplistic "point-fives," androids designed to act as "half a person" lacking any needs within a human-android relationship, the novel condemns the emptiness of such a liaison. Yet, this condemnation, presented through Ha as she disposes of her point-five, Kamran, is certainly not an indictment of human-synthetic relationships since she immediately replaces this shallow relationship with a meaningful one shared with the central android of the novel, Evrim. This theme, similarly explored via Rustem's loneliness and isolation, compliments the novel's wider focus in interspecies connection and communication. Though speculating upon the possible evolutionary development of octopi, the novel does not contain the hallmarks of "hard" SF. It is much more steeped in philosophical concerns, namely those of post-humanism, and fits more ideally within the social science fiction category due to its consistent criticisms of corporate practices, social environmental exploitation, and the humanist-oriented subjugation of other life forms, whether organic and non-human or synthetic.

The novel's nomination signals a continued interest in rethinking humankind's relationship to other life forms via a clever thought experiment. In a way reminiscent of Andrian Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time* (2015), Nayler's narrative challenges its audience to consider how unexpected developments within a species' evolution could lend it further power and influence. In this way, both novels undermine the potential reader's anthropocentric, hierarchical thinking towards, in the case of Tchaikovsky's novel, spiders and, in the case of Nayler's text, octopi. It simultaneously reflects current interests in how technology, though capable of enriching the lived experiences of its users, may also be utilized to enhance the isolation and loneliness quickly becoming a hallmark of 21<sup>st</sup>-century life.

The themes underlying Nayler's story come together perhaps most clearly in a conversation between Ha and Evrim directly following her decision to abandon her point-five and seek community with fully conscious individuals. As the passage underscores, Ha, with whom the reader is aligned, is positioned directly opposite DIANIMA's leader, Arnkatla Mínerudóttir-Chan, and the friction between them

is based upon Ha's commitment to community and communication across, in this case, species. In this scene, Evrim reveals to Ha that Arnkatla intends not to communicate or connect with the octopi, but "to extract data. To build the next Evrim, a mind more advanced than mine" (324). As the android continues his explanation, the text's philosophical underpinnings emerge: "I know her. She isn't like you, Ha. She doesn't want communication. What she wants is mastery. She wants to create, and she wants to control. For you, communicating with the octopuses—understanding them—is an end in itself. For her, it's about how she can exploit that knowledge, use it to push her own work forward" (324). This conversation, acting as a key to the novel, emphasizes the contrasting motivations and values of the protagonist and antagonist: Ha desires connections with other life forms and values them as equals; Arnkatla seeks to gain increasingly more power through her technological advancements and judges human life to be superior to other life forms (and, as the novel's conclusion hints, she values some human lives as superior to others of the same species). As this passage illustrates, Nayler's novel emphasizes the power of authentic communication--and this importantly does not exclude synthetic life or downplay its claims of consciousness. To see living things, organic or synthetic, as intrinsically valuable and, through openness, vulnerability, and communication, worthy of community and connection is, as Evrim and Ha learn, an antidote to humanism and the isolation of humans both from other life forms and each other.

### **What Does the Nomination Say About the State of SF?**

**Virginia:** Taken alongside the other Nebula nominees, the fact that *NtN* and the *Locked Tomb* series as a whole play around with overlapping fantasy and SF elements seems to be indicative of the clear shift towards fantasy that's going on contemporarily. Make no mistake, the trappings of *NtN* are very much science fictional—colonists on one of many worlds under threat contemplate their ability to flee off-planet, people travel in spaceships, armored convoys and megapolises that cover the surface of the planet provide the story's technologized backdrop—but these elements exist side-by-side with swordfighting, ghosts, blood magic, royal machinations, and court political intrigue.



As others have also mentioned in their reviews, nominees this year, at least, also largely seem to be attempting the anachronistic and playfully pop cultural tone that Muir uses, although seemingly with far less skill and/or success (full disclosure, I attempted to read another Nebula nominee that I won't mention by name here and was so offput by its own attempts at blithe, contemporary repartee that I put it down after the first chapter).

In many ways, *NtN* is a book about what it means to love and be loved, despite not all of those ways being healthy (to, uh, say the least). Sure, it's a big queer book—it's horrible lesbian necromancers in space doing horrible things to each other and themselves and everyone around them—but it's also a book about how the love you give is all you have at the end of the world and the reckoning that comes along with that. What does it mean to give of yourself, over and over again, and be forever changed in the process? What would you do for such a transformation? Who would (and do) you become? To use slang that will probably itself be anachronistic by the time this review gets published, much less in ten thousand years, the phrase “you can't take loved away” lives rent-free in my head (and I hope it always will).

**Dominick:** Nothing in *Nettle and Bone* really moved or grabbed me. The things that should have been easy to predict (spoiler alert): bone dog was going to die and then be put back together; Fenris (the world-weary warrior) was going to put his life on the line but be saved by a clever intervention; Fenris and Marra would eventually stop mooning over each other and move towards actual romantic contact, etc. The closest the book came was in a sequence involving a secondary character, in which Kingfisher rings change from the living toy convention. In this novel, the living toy is a “curse-child,” in this instance a puppet, that latches onto and dominates the child who gave it life:

“Somebody gives a lonely child a toy and they pour all their hopes and fears and problems into it. Do it long enough and intensely enough, and then it just needs a stray bit of bad luck and the toy wakes up. Of course, it knows that the only reason it's alive is because of the child. A tiny personal god with one worshipper. It latches on and ... well.” She clucked her tongue. “Normally you get them pried off and burned long before adolescence. Impressive that it lasted this long.”

“We can burn it,” said Marra. “Burning is fine. I'll get the kindling.”

“Not without her permission. You don’t go tearing off an adult woman’s god and setting it on fire.” The dust-wife gave her a sharp look, as if she were suggesting something rude.

“It was choking her!”

“It’s her neck, not yours. We can ask before we leave, if you like.” (144)

This passage, and the sequence involving the dominated Margaret, is to me the novel’s strongest commentary on the complexity of how power is wielded, and accepted, even to one’s own detriment. It also offers a particularly chilling turn on the living toy trope that I have rarely seen handled similarly (Alan Moore’s version of Rupert might be an example, but that was a very passing use). The fate of the original fairy godmother is a similar instance, though keen readers will know that something is up the moment they read the “blessing” she gives.

I was often amused, however, by the novel’s deliberate humour, such as the explanation for why it’s ok to put a demon into a chicken but not into a rooster. The book is often quite funny. That might not carry the same weight we are likely to give to that which we find emotionally or intellectually moving, but it is no mean thing, and I value it.

**Ian:** Is *Spear* SF? No, not really, but as with the other books we’re looking at here, SF has, for this period at least, passed the baton to fantasy: if I had to speculate why, it’s because tech has become so obviously dystopian at this point that a switch to fantasy is very appealing. I think that there’s been a real movement to promote SFF writ large that a) plays with genre boundaries; and b) has for lack of a better word representation. Some of this is representation for its own sake, which often to me comes off as forced or beside the point, but of course I’m not the sort of person who was largely un- or mis-represented for decades, so it’s not really for me to say.

## Discussion

**Dominick:** Literally the first sentence of Virginia’s comments on *Nona the Ninth* reduced my likelihood of reading the book to virtually zero: “*Nona the Ninth* is the third novel in Tamsyn Muir’s Locked Tomb series (originally slated to be a trilogy...” This of course says nothing about the quality of the book, and perhaps

a lot about my own weariness with the series as the default setting for so much contemporary SF/Fantasy. I understand the appeal from a marketing perspective, but all too often the result is repetition and diminishing returns—accompanied by expanding page counts. *A Song of Ice and Fire* may be the bar for this: the first book was, I thought, pretty damn good, but I can practically guarantee that the fifth is the last one I will read, as what seemed fresh and innovative in book one had become tired and predictable, not to mention waaaay too drawn-out, by book five. Virginia's comments on what makes the book appealing and worth nominating do point to some intriguing elements—it sounds somewhat like the sort of hybrid stuff that, say, Charles Stross does in his work (Veronica Hollinger once described Stross to me as “jolly,” and I have to agree), but I have no interest in investing in a series to get it. (Because I am the kind of reader who has a hard time stopping reading a series when it suffers that inevitable downward turn, I try to avoid them unless I am reasonably sure I will be entranced.)

**Virginia:** For both Griffin's *Spear* and Kingfisher's *Nettle and Bone*, I just simply...don't care about mythological or fairy tale retellings. I don't want to comment on whether returning to historical touchpoints (be they individual stories or genres) is an interesting form of art or not, because clearly—as Ian indicates in his analysis of *Spear*—there are still new points that can be made and new approaches to age-old stories that reveal something of value. But for me, personally, something has to be really exciting or really new to make a story worth revisiting, and simply invoking contemporary gender or sexual politics isn't enough to pass that threshold. Perhaps that speaks to the wealth of options written by, about, and for women and gender minorities and queer people now, but I'd rather see new stories than try to recuperate old ones. In a larger sense, this resistance ties into the reboot burnout of the media landscape over the last ten years or so. How many versions of the same story do we need? I ask that sincerely, not in an aggravated huff. What is it that keeps us coming back to the same types of stories, sometimes even the exact same story, over and over again? What do we gain by worrying a story like an open sore? Perhaps in the case of the gendered focus of *Spear* and *Nettle and Bone*, the answer is about ownership—making something that originally excluded you, for you. But that baseline familiarity means that any retelling or estranging revisitation of a genre and its tropes is inherently always going to exist as the distaff counterpart of an original, with the original a perpetual specter in the background. Retellings cannot exist on their own; whatever new ideas they have

exist in a perpetual state of Hegelian dialectic with the original. For my part, I'd rather have an ambitious failure over an attempt (no matter how successful, as it seems as if *Spear*, at least, was and is) at revisiting old ground in a new way.

**Ian:** Reading both your comments here, I have to admit you're right. Why do we need yet another version of an Arthurian tale? Why not a fantasy universe of its own? I thought *Nettle and Bone* was cute and a fun read, but nothing like an award-nominated text, and while I still maintain that *Spear* is very well composed, I can completely see why we don't really need it. Virginia asks, "How many versions of the same story do we need?" and it makes me think of all those TV shows based on the same Marvel characters. None of them is terrible, and some of them are pretty good—I would absolutely pay good money to see *Rogers: The Musical*, and I don't even like musicals—but it just seems like the heavy hand of capitalism and its inherent risk-adversity. Would Griffith have been published had she written her fantasy in its own world, or does corporate publishing demand a safe choice?

**Michael:** Virginia's commentary on *Nona the Ninth* and specifically its comments upon the novel's unique use of language and efforts to estrange a wide swath of topics intrigues me a great deal. I do side with Dominick in that I am likewise exhausted by SFF's almost default preference for series over novels, but I remain interested in this book. I am not particularly inclined to read *Nettle and Bone* or *Spear* for the very basic reason that I do not venture much into fantasy. That being said, the revisionist qualities mentioned do very much attract me, especially if they prove capable of emphasizing in a unique way qualities of the source material. I guess I am torn then, clearly.

**Dominick:** *Spear* is perhaps now slightly more likely to end up in my vastly bloated TBR... well, pile, I guess, because I do have a fondness for Arthurian narratives, and Percivale has always been for me an especially interesting character. However, as Virginia has already said, it's been done. There's plenty of revisionist Arthurian stuff, not to mention plenty of revisionist fairy tales. Is it good enough to be worth it? Ian certainly makes a good case, at least insofar as my tastes are concerned—I did complain about Kingfisher's evidently deliberate avoidance of authentic-sounding language, after all, and Griffith has apparently avoided that problem. It is a bit of a sad state for lit of the fantastic, though, if the simple fact that a book is actually good is a sufficient reason to nominate it for the award as best book of the year.

**Ian:** Honestly, I think it's more like a lifetime achievement award for Griffith than praise for this book in particular. If I knew enough about the Oscars, I bet I could name a couple of actors or directors who were nominated for or won an award in the same manner: that is, that the particular film wasn't their best work, but they'd been shafted or ignored earlier in their careers.

Let's look at *The Mountain in the Sea*, which I put down about 15% of the way through. I was eager to read a novel about cephalopod intelligence. What was it going to do that Adrian Tchaikovsky took in a different direction in *Children of Ruin*? But I never got there: it was just too badly written in a way that really bothers me. It did what I usually call a Full Neal Stephenson: it introduces a secondary/tertiary character who is well known-to the narrator or protagonist by saying *and there was Steve* or *Steve stepped into the room and said, "Yes."* and then gives us three long paragraphs of background on Steve, their life story, their relationship to the narrator/protagonist, etc. By the time we get back to whatever the next line of dialogue after "Yes" is, I'm back in the main storyline, but the long pause of almost entirely irrelevant information—especially at this early point in the story—has jarred my willing suspension of disbelief both in that storyline and in whether the book will be any good are now firmly in question. In *Mountain*, I had already put the book down a couple of times because the too much background on the local Vietnamese guy had already pressed my buttons, but then we got to the AI and it gave so much detail on the whole backstory of why there was only one real AI, etc., and that was where I DNFed it. I tried again the next day and couldn't get more than a few pages.

Only give the exact amount of background you actually need to give, with maaaybe a cool detail or two, worked in organically. Somebody like William Gibson does this so well: we'll get more and more information about someone, but only when we need to. But the Full Neal bothers me most because it's such a Writing 101 mistake, in that giving all that background at once not only jars the reader out of the real story, but also creates this problem of address that's subtle but cannot be unseen once you notice. In *Mountain*, the POV character is very well-acquainted with the details of the AI's backstory. They wouldn't need to mention all this to themselves, so who is speaking to whom here? Up until now, we've used third-person omniscient but with enough limitations to link us to the POV character, so we can imagine ourselves in their position in the story. But then there's this discontinuity on the level of narrative structure when (lots of)

information about the AI comes to us: since the POV character should know all this already, it breaks the link between us and that character and now we're in a different story.

**Dominick:** I was already interested in *The Mountain in the Sea* (as it is the only nominee that was actually SF, rather than Fantasy or a SF/Fantasy hybrid, and I am more of an SF sort than a Fantasy fellow), and Michael's commentary suggests that this one hits a lot of my sweet spots. As he notes, and as others have commented on, the focus not on alien others but terrestrial others is exciting, and far more rare than it perhaps should be. In the digital age, it is easy to forget that there's still tons of stuff on this planet about which we know virtually nothing, so there is still plenty of room for speculation right here. Michael's comments also suggested to me that the book is interested in specific topics, such as the nature of consciousness and free will, that I like to see explored—and with the oceanic context thrown in, which made me think of one of my SF fave writers, Peter Watts, I found myself feeling a bit excited about this book. Even if the book is not hard SF per se, as per Michael's comments, it does seem to be interested in fairly rigorous exploration—and there is no reason why that can't go along with philosophy and “literariness.” When I read Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars books years ago, I naively/optimistically thought that they might actually kill that hard/soft SF dichotomy. They didn't, but it does seem easier now to put out books that straddle the STEM and Humanities sides of SF than it used to be. Even Ian's critique of the Stephenson-like stylistic choices Nayler makes were a selling point for me, as Stephenson remains one of my favourite SF writers (in part for precisely the characteristics Ian criticizes.) Bonus for me with Michael's comments: I had not heard much about Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time* before, but I think I may be putting it on my Christmas list.

**Ian:** The *SFRA Review* should have a new section, imaginative title yet to be found, where two of us face off about a particular author/book, and you and I, Dominick, can argue for pages about Neal Stephenson, who I periodically have to hateread.

**Dominick:** Not a bad idea, actually! TBH, *Cryptonomicon* was one of the few books of a thousand or so pages I would happily have seen longer. I am a couple of books behind, admittedly, or more--I think *Anathem* is the last one I read. I am not terribly good at keeping up on new stuff.

**Ian:** Okay, we're doing it. "How to win friends among the SF community" is our working title.

Let's talk about the move toward fantasy that all of us seem to have observed. I'd like to know your thoughts on why so much contemporary SF is really much closer to fantasy—even among the critics' awards, not just the fan awards.

**Michael:** I must say the slide towards fantasy is very apparent this year. While reading *Mountain* I was not thinking of the nominees broadly. Having viewed each assessment, however, that tendency is clear. I also agree with Virginia in her assessment of the year overall: this definitely feels like an off year for SFF. Nothing seems to be especially deserving of the award.

**Ian:** To add to my earlier thoughts, there are two factors at work, here. The first one is that the last few years have really shown us all how awful and dystopian high tech has become. AIs taking people's jobs, deepfake porn, algorithmic ads, social media content that goes about three clicks from cute cat pictures to Tate/Peterson/Rogan, whatever that awful man has done to make Twitter even worse than it already was... the list goes on. So it's next to impossible at this point to write a compelling novel about science and technology without it seeming naïve or loony. The premise of SF used to be that tech would free the human spirit, give us new worlds to explore, make things better. And it clearly hasn't and doesn't, for the very most part. Whatever stupid name Twitter is called now is just 24/7 disinformation and (deepfaked?) videos of children being slaughtered: tech has (IMO irretrievably) broken our public discourse. Tech has freed the billionaire spirit, and it's frankly awful.

The second factor is that scholars, fans and writers have undertaken a (long-overdue and deserved) look at the history of the genre and have found it wanting. Golden Age SF wasn't just benignly neglecting writers who weren't white dudes: it was actively gatekeeping them out. Too much of the genre is bound up in colonialist tropes, and the representation and portrayal of women is hard to even look at these days. I think this also makes it harder to write a compelling SF novel, because as a writer you'd have to be constantly worrying about some sensitivity reader getting on you for an imperfect portrayal of a marginalized group—and to be fair, we should strive to portray others well and not resort to stereotypes. You can't write a novel about a colonized planet where you're estranging our own

society, because people are get on you for portraying colonialism, even if that's just the surface level of the estrangement.

To the extent that the Horrid Puppies had anything approaching an actual point, it's that it's going to come off as naïve or privileged to just write a high-tech adventure yarn that doesn't wear its heart on its sleeve about its political aspirations, or make an extended dystopian critique of tech, or resort to unbearable Becky Chambers tropes. Writing SF is riskier now, and not just from the financial standpoint in a world where the corporatization of the publishing industry has made it largely unprofitable to write unless you're at the very top of the heap. So if we take the definition of SF v fantasy as whether the novums/novi are subject to the cognition effect—that is, do the innovations in the portrayed world make sense as scientific in the context of that world—it's easier and less potentially problematic to write fantasy than SF, now. Readers, for the most part, don't really want to read about a world where *Oryx and Crake* is the *best-case* scenario. They want something fundamentally implausible: take tech away from the billionaires, and the same with energy policy and civil rights, and let ordinary people solve big problems.

I should make it clear that there's nothing wrong with enjoying a cozy SF novel that's really mostly fantasy and focused around overtly progressive politics. My point is that the genre has become limited by real-world dystopia fomented by tech, so retreating to fantasy seems safer in a number of different ways.

**Dominick:** I think my own ruminations about “Why fantasy now” have similarities with Ian's. I have non-academic SF friends who lament how hard it is to find optimistic SF any more. I don't think it's quite as hard as they think, but I do think that Ian provides good reasons why a good chunk of serious SF these days veers towards the dystopian.

That said, the first thought that came to me about why fantasy seems to be in the ascendant is that we now live in a post-truth world, as well as in a world in which a not insignificant number of people are basically actively anti-science. How do you write SF in a world in which distinguishing (or even caring about) what is true has become, if not impossible, at least difficult? The tech reasons Ian cites are huge factors here, but I think we should not overlook other social influences. Trump's elevation of the lie to the standard mode of discourse, and MAGA-folk's dedication to believing whatever Trump says regardless of how many mountains



of evidence there are contra Trump, well ... that's millions upon millions of people who are much happier to believe in fantasy than reality. Now, obviously, a lot of fantasy can and does present troubling and complex worlds; that a work is fantasy does not mean it is going to be all rainbows and unicorns. However, fantasyscapes do tend to be far more removed from lived reality than SF worlds (IMO, I hasten to add)--even far future space opera brimming with alien cultures makes certain assumptions about how the world works. Fantasy can make up its own rules.

And even if a lot of Fantasy does address the same sort of complex thematic areas as a lot of SF does, that is perhaps obscured (more) by the fantasy context. I am totally speculating here, but perhaps some readers of fantasy see fantasy worlds simply as escapes, rather than as distorted reflections of life. One hears a lot of complaints about “woke” SF, but if there have been similar complaints about Fantasy, I seem to have missed them--entirely possible, since I don't particularly follow fantasy. So, yeah, I would agree with Ian's contention that Fantasy is perhaps safer/easier to write these days, but I would add that it is perhaps also safer/easier to read, as it allows the illusion of genuine alterity.

**Virginia:** I completely agree with everything Ian and Dom noted about the post-truth, anti-tech (I hesitate to say “science” simply because science itself is a fraught concept) impacts on the SF/fantasy media ecosystem right now, and to that, I'd like to add another element that Dom already began hinting at: safety and comfort.

Let me preface this by saying that there's absolutely nothing wrong with enjoying a cozy, comfortable story that aligns with your politics and supports your personal worldview. This is part of the reason we read: to discover our own selves in someone else's vision. Finding that can be exhilarating and connect you to a wider community of people that you never knew existed and who, upon discovery, immediately feel like home. But finding comfort is only one part of why we read, and at least in my own anecdotal experience, what I feel like I've been seeing over the last ten years or so is an almost complete retreat to safety and comfort. This is, in large part, due to the conflation of media consumption with personal beliefs and ideology that seems so pervasive today. This approach, of course, leaves no possibility of separation between art and artist, but also—and maybe more worryingly—no separation between consumer and product. The idea that depicting or even just engaging with an idea is the same thing as endorsing

it allows for absolutely no exploration, no challenge, no glimpse into difference, and no possibility for personal growth. And for me, at least, that's the hallmark of a truly great piece of art or literature: you're changed by the encounter. I suspect this may be a somewhat outdated way of assessing "greatness," but I really believe that great literature causes you to confront concepts or ideas in ways that may be unexpected or new, and in so doing, the reader is changed by the encounter in ways they never could have imagined.

Reboots, retellings, and familiar fantasy milieus and tropes give the illusion of novelty while relying on the trappings of the familiar. Can there be groundbreaking, unique fantasy? Of course. But if we want to really get nitty gritty into genre definitions, fantasy is a much more recognizable (and definable) genre than SF specifically because it does operate within relatively recognizable and defined parameters that ensure that readers enter it with a certain degree of familiarity. As Ian pointed out, the real world and all possible permutations of it going forward seem increasingly dystopian; it's not hard to imagine why writers and readers alike would want to check out of that entirely. But the real world and the way it's changing are also complicated. I do think many contemporary fantasists are attempting to engage with this complexity in a sincere way, and perhaps using recognizable and familiar tropes is a way to dip a toe in the water.

I don't think there's anything wrong with escapism or fantasy or enjoying the familiar. There are a million reasons to want to find comfort and safety in what we read, especially when the world around us seems structurally designed to strip us of every bit of comfort and safety we have. But I do find it suspicious when these kinds of stories are the only ones being held up and celebrated at a larger organizational level, and riskier attempts to engage with complexity are—at best—ignored or gatekept, and at worst, crushed utterly (Isabel Fall, anyone?).

I think the neoliberal conservatism of publishing today is making an extremely boring field in general, and scholars who say it's "our moral responsibility" [all names redacted] to depict "a world we want to live in" are reducing the possibilities of that world to sunshiney pablum.

**Dominick:** Yes. The idea that artists should choose only to depict the world through the lens of some particular social justice issue and be vilified if they don't, or don't do it exactly right (that is, exactly as each separate critic thinks it should be

done) is IMO... not a good one. This sort of attempt to limit the function of what art can do has various precedents, none good.

**Ian:** The “only” is the key bit, there. I mean, if someone wants to write like Becky Chambers, and someone wants to read that, more power to them. I’m sure there are things I love that would make such a person stop reading. The corporatization of the publishing industry has absolutely changed SF for the worse, just like it has most other genres. There’s two different forms of risk-adversity at work here: people are reluctant to write/publish anything that critiques the “world we [who’s “we”?] want to live in” for fear of getting cancelled on social media, and publishers are reluctant to publish anything that they’re not sure will increase the bottom line, for fear of losing their jobs when the next earnings call doesn’t go as spectacularly as Wall Street wants. These are both awful trends, but to what extent are they inherently related to each other, and to what extent is it just—to borrow a piece of corporate killspeak—“synergy”?

**Dominick:** Agreed, the “only” is key. I have never been keen on any sort of dogmatic insistence on what art can and cannot (or should and should not) do. Faulkner’s comment on the author’s responsibility has its own disturbing elements but nevertheless nails the idea that the only thing the artist “must” do is what the artistic urge requires: “The writer’s only responsibility is to his art. He will be completely ruthless if he is a good one. He has a dream. It anguishes him so much he must get rid of it. He has no peace until then. Everything goes by the board: honor, pride, decency, security, happiness, all, to get the book written. If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is worth any number of old ladies.”

That does not mean, of course, that there is no room for criticism, either. And I *am* a middle-aged white dude, too, so bear that in mind when evaluating my perspective. Disagreement welcome.

**Ian:** But to your actual point, and to Virginia’s as well, the corporatization of the publishing industry has drained all the weird out of SF. Nobody is willing to take chances. The only weird we still seem to get is from really long-established authors such as VanderMeer and China Miéville... and now I think I understand why I think this year’s crop of nominees is so underwhelming: they’re so risk-averse, so Not Weird. Not boring, so much, but like Virginia said about *Spear*, do we really

need another take on thousand-year-old stories? Everything is a sequel, a series, a remake.

Final thoughts? Mine is: now I have to go back and get through the bad writing to really try to appreciate *Mountain*, because it sounds like easily the weirdest of this bunch. Virginia has changed my mind about *Spear*. It's good enough, but is it necessary? It's real unlikely I'm ever going to pick up *Legends & Lattes*, the one we didn't discuss here: it really sounds like Not My Cup of Tea.

**Virginia:** Nice pun. I DNF'ed it. I also want to take a crack at *Mountain* now, since it sounds like it might be the kind of ambitious swing that I appreciate.

**Dominick:** My final thoughts, I guess, are that the discussion we've had seems to confirm that we are in a bit of a fallow period for SF, or at any rate for SF being recognized as worthy of receiving awards. Maybe there is something of a transition happening in the field, with the emergence of afrofuturism, indigenous futurism, and more diversity generally in SF (and fantasy), but it is not yet really taking centre stage with readers?

**Michael:** Having read these commentaries, I must say the slide towards fantasy is very apparent this year. While reading *Mountain* I was not thinking of the nominees broadly. Having viewed each assessment, however, that tendency is clear. I also agree with Virginia in her assessment of the year overall: this definitely feels like an off year for SFF. Nothing seems to be especially deserving of the award.