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“Who Is Tiptree, What is She?": An Examination of a SF Legend
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James Tiptree, Jr. is one of those authors you sort of just fall in love with. It's not a nice love either, not strolls in the park on a warm April day. It's a violent all-consuming fierce sort of love, mirroring her own life, her own stories.

I've been researching Tiptree for a while now, and the language and discourse surrounding her work both before the science fiction community finds out that she's a woman, and afterwards. Now, she's not the only woman science fiction writer to use a male pseudonym, and she's not the only one who's had her hand forced to reveal her identity. But the story of Tiptree is particularly engaging because of just how well she was known in the science fiction community --- she kept up a lively correspondence with fanzine and anthology editors, fellow writers, everyone from Delany to Russ to Silverberg to LeGuin. When her identity was discovered, it was not a small news story. You can learn a lot about the community, about the world of SF writers, their prejudices and loves and foibles and weaknesses, just by looking at how they write about Tiptree; and, to a certain extent, how she writes about them.

Beyond all that, though, lies the plain fact that she's one of the greatest short story authors I've ever read. Her work is a masterclass in short fiction.

James Tiptree, Jr., wrote over fifty science fiction stories during their career from 1968 to 1987, won several Hugos and Nebulas and became a legend in the science fiction community. From 1968 to 1976, no one knew Tiptree's true identity, that Tip (as Tiptree preferred to be called) was a married woman in her sixties. Alice Bradley Sheldon led a varied and strange life, spent her childhood traveling with her family through India and Africa, joined the army during World War II and rose to the rank of Major before retiring, worked as an intelligence analyst for

the CIA, traveled extensively in the Yucatan, got a PhD to work as a Research Psychologist, and wrote some of the most brilliant and innovative science fiction stories of the 70's and 80's.

Reading forwards, after words, editor's notes, reviews, and the occasional snippet of correspondence of science fiction writers, readers, and editors in this period gives one a strong sense of the community in the genre. Everyone seems to know everyone else, to have read everyone else's work. The whole genre is on a first name basis. The only exception to this familiarity is the tendency of editors to refer to women writers by their last name, for example, Ms. Russ instead of Joanna. This was a community where a twenty year old like Jeffrey Smith could hold a Symposium on Women in Science Fiction with legendary figures like Joanna Russ and Samuel R. Delany. This was a community where you knew the guy who wrote that Star Trek episode about Tribbles, where weirdos and scientists and mathematicians and academics and stay-at-home moms wrote frantic wild fiction by the seat of their pants, published each other in their fanzines, wrote stories that rang like volleys as responses to another's tale.

It is this environment that James Tiptree, Jr., steps into in 1968. In the midst of a world as close-knit and gossipy as a high school cafeteria drops a man who refuses to reveal any personal information about himself, who no one has ever seen in person. Tiptree is elusive, an endless enigma, and it is this aspect of him that is most often remarked upon by editors. Despite this secrecy, Tiptree loved the science fiction community. In a 1970 interview—the only interview held with Tiptree while he was still simply Tiptree—he writes perhaps one of the most loving and awe-filled descriptions of the science fiction community:

What but a staggering, towering, glittering mad lay cathedral? Built like the old ones by spontaneous volunteers, some bringing one laborious gargoyle, some a load of stone, some engineering a spire. Over years now, over time the thing has grown, you know? To what god? Who knows. Something different from the gods of the other arts. A god that isn't there yet, maybe. An urge saying Up, saying Screw it all. Saying Try. To . . . be . . . more? We don't know. But everyone has made this. Limping, scratching, wrangling,

clowning, goony, sauced, hes, shes, its, thems, bemmies for all I know, swooping glory, freaked out in corners, ridiculous, noble, queerly vulnerable in some ways others aren't—totally irrelevant, really.

These are the nearest to winged people that we have and I would shut up forever rather than hurt one of them. Dead or alive. (*Infinity* 203-4.)

One of the most surprising revelations, when reviewing contemporary views on Tiptree, is the fact that some of what would later be called his most feminist works are not construed as such originally. A particularly clear cut example is presented in *Aurora: Beyond Equality*, a woman-focused anthology published in 1976 that features a story by both Tiptree and one of Alice Sheldon's other pseudonyms, Raccoona Sheldon. While the bibliographical information for Sheldon's story points out the story's "feminist themes," Tiptree's does not. Raccoona Sheldon's story in *Aurora* was "Your Faces, O My Sister! Your Faces Filled Of Light!" a story about a young woman who constantly imagines she is in an all-female world, in which everyone is unceasingly friendly to her, and there is little to fear. Tiptree's story, on the other hand, was his novella "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" a Nebula and Hugo award winning story that is now considered one of his most feminist, and is perhaps his most popular. In it, three male astronauts who have been lost in space are rescued by an all-female crew, and over time these astronauts realize they have accidentally traveled into the future, where a plague wiped out all but eleven thousand people, and left no male survivors. Both stories imagine a woman's world, a world free of male influence.

Many of Tip's stories include extremely feminist themes, and that's a constant, that they're not considered feminist before his identity is exposed. Though the science fiction community during this time period was, I'd say, the most accepting out of all the genres of female writers, there was still a level of patronization and ghettoization when it came to women-authored works. Examining the dissonance between what we now know about Tiptree and what

the editors thought they knew before her identity was revealed in 1976 is terrifyingly fun, and provides monstrous amounts of insight into the attitudes of the SF community in that time period, and how those attitudes affected editorial decisions.

As for gaps in my collection, there are several items I would love to have but are slightly prohibitive due to their cost or rarity. There's a particular edition of Tiptree's first short story collection, *Ten Thousand Light-Years from Home*, published by Gregg Press in 1976 with the title "10,000 Light-Years From Home." This edition has, besides the standard introduction by Harry Harrison, an introductory essay by Gardner Dozois that critically examines Tiptree's works. This is particularly valuable because it was published /before/ the science fiction community knew of Tiptree's true identity, thus providing more insight into the attitudes towards and views of Tiptree's works when she was assumed to be a man than I usually get.

Unfortunately, copies generally seem to run somewhere in the \$125- \$200 range. Of course, I'd also be thrilled to have anything signed by Tiptree herself, but any books bearing her signature run around \$400 - \$750, just /slightly/ outside of my price range.

The first edition, first printing of Tiptree's 1975 collection *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* would be fantastic to acquire. *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* contains the somewhat infamous introductory essay by Robert Silverberg written in 1974 "Who is Tiptree, What is He." In later editions of *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*, this essay is appended with a note by Silverberg written after Tiptree's identity became known, but I would like to have the book as it originally appeared, sans note, if such an edition exists.

Tiptree's mother, Mary Hastings Bradley, published two different books about her and her daughter's travels abroad focusing primarily around the young Alice Bradley, one called *Alice in Elephantland* and the other *Alice in Jungland*. These books are rare and when sold are

sold far outside of my price range, but they'd certainly create a more comprehensive collection on Tiptree.

Ultimately, I'd love for my collection to contain a variety of different Tiptree-related ephemera that's currently out of my price range or impossible to track down. Science Fiction isn't exactly a field of study that many scholars or historians engage in, and not one where effort is made to preserve highly delicate or rare objects, and that's one of the reasons I started this collection in the first place. I have a slightly substantial collection of old trade paperbacks and scifi magazines in general, not just because I want to possess them for my own sake though that's certainly part of it, but because these are pieces of literary and cultural history that no one else is interested in preserving. During the process of forming this collection, I bought two books from an online seller who placed extremely sticky stickers onto the spines of two books, and when I attempted to remove the stickers, the spines were damaged. I note this in the bibliographical entries for those books, but I bring this up because I felt genuine distress when this happened. Not because something I'd purchased had suffered some sort of cosmetic damage, and not out of some misplaced books-must-never-be-sullied materialistic worship, but because these were books in pristine condition that were no longer published, and who knows how many out there of this same edition are still in this good of a condition, and who knows how long those will still exist? There's a fanzine published by Jeffrey D. Smith in the 1970's that has the only interview Tip gave before everyone knew Tip was Alice B. Sheldon, and I'm not sure if any copies exist outside of the three or so in special collections in different universities. Science Fiction may be pop culture, but looking at the history of this woman and her career and her involvement in the SF community, how could you not want to preserve all of that? There's so much value in Tiptree's work, not just in the stories themselves, but in the delicate web of

interactions and reactions that shape the metanarrative of her career and her place in the science fiction community.

Bibliography

Carr, Terry, ed. *The Best Science Fiction of the Year #2*. New York: Ballantine, 1973. Print. Includes "Painwise." Another Tiptree story also makes the "honorable mentions" list in this anthology.

Dann, Jack and Gardner Dozois, eds. *Aliens!* New York: Pocket Books, 1980. Print. Includes "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side."

Dann, Jack M. and Gardner Dozois, eds. *Aliens Among Us*. New York: Ace, 2000. Print. Includes "I'm Too Big, But I Love To Play."

del Ray, Judy-Lynn, ed. *Stellar #4*. New York: Del Ray, 1978. Print. Includes "We Who Stole the Dream."

Gerrold, David, ed. *Protostars*. New York: Ballantine, 1971. Print.

Includes "I'll Be Waiting For You When the Swimming Pool is Empty." Gerrold didn't edit that many anthologies -- five is the number I'm getting off ISFDB -- but two of them contain stories by Tiptree, this one and the 1972 anthology *Generation*. *Generation* actually have two different stories by Tip, "Through a Lass Darkly" and "Amberjack." Gerrold provides an interesting case study on the climate of SF at this time, mostly how very very young most of the people involved in the genre seemed to be. Gerrold was in his mid twenties when he published *Protostars*. He was twenty-three when the Star Trek episode he wrote aired, and I mention this because he wrote "The Trouble with Tribbles," one of the most infamous *Star Trek TOS* episodes.

Phillips, Julie. "Dear Starbear: Letters Between Ursula K. LeGuin and James Tiptree, Jr." *Fantasy & Science Fiction* September 2006. 77-105. Print.

Excerpts from Tip's letters to/from Ursula K. LeGuin. Sort of heartbreakingly adorable? That's the best way to put it. I highly recommend, if you're poking around in this collection, reading this article. Tip and LeGuin had a great friendship before and after the identity of Tip was known, they have nicknames for each other and doodle on the letters and it's rather wonderful. The two seem to feel a kinship between them, and it's just incredible to get this sort of behind the scenes glance at how stories get made, and how writers connect through their works with other writers, and are influenced by each other.

Phillips, Julie. *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007. Print.

Phillips' book is the book on Tiptree. Highly informative, exhaustively researched, Phillips tells the compelling story of Tiptree's life from her early days traveling with her parents through Africa to her last years spent as a writer. I'm extremely jealous, actually, of the access Phillips seems to have to Tiptree's papers and the papers and collections of others, and all of the interviews with famous and infamous figures in the science fiction community over the course of her readership. This book is an important part of this collection not just because it's Tip's only biography, but because it's through this book that I formed a strong emotional attachment to Tiptree. Reading about the various psychological problems she had throughout her life, I felt a deep connection with her that rooted my interest in her works.

Russ, Joanna and James Tiptree, Jr. *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?/Souls*. New York: Tor, 1989. Print.

This book is one of the Tor Double Series that Tor produced in the late eighties and early nineties. This isn't the only Tor Double that Tiptree was in -- "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" was paired with Vonda N. McIntyre's "Screwtop," and "The Color of Neanderthal Eyes" shared a Tor Double with "And Strange at Ecbatan the Trees" by Michael Bishop. Russ and Tiptree interacted a lot through their respective careers. This was when Russ was, comparatively, a much younger woman, and Tiptree seems to have a lot of admiration for her.

Saha, Arthur W., ed. *The Year's Best Fantasy Stories: 10*. New York: Daw Books, Inc., 1984. Print.

Includes "Beyond the Dead Reef."

Saha, Arthur W. and Donald A. Wollheim, eds. *The 1973 Annual World's Best SF*. New York: Daw Books, Inc., 1973. Print.

Includes "The Man Who Walked Home."

Saha, Arthur W. and Donald A. Wollheim, eds. *The 1978 Annual World's Best SF*. New York: Daw Books, Inc., 1978. Print.

Includes "The Screwfly Solution."

Sargent, Pamela, ed. *The New Women of Wonder*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978. Print.

Includes "The Women Men Don't See." Originally published in 1977.

Sheldon, Raccoona. "The Screwfly Solution." *Analog* June 1977. 54-73. Print.

One of Tip's most famous short stories, originally published under another pseudonym. Includes the chillingly fantastic last lines "I don't think I saw an angel. I think I saw a real estate agent."

Tiptree Jr., James. "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side." *Fantasy & Science Fiction* March 1972.

Cover has some damage, and the spine is somewhat warped, but still in readable condition. Probably the worst preserved out of the magazines I have, but it's hard to feel bad about that since this was a magazine that was meant to last a few months that's now over forty years old.

Tiptree Jr., James. "Beyond the Dead Reef." *Fantasy & Science Fiction* January 1983. 4-18. Print.

Tiptree Jr., James. "Birth of a Salesman." *Analog* March 1968. 73-85. Print.

Alice Sheldon's first work published under the name of Tiptree. Not, as some people I think believe, her first ever publication. That would be "The Lucky Ones," an essay about Alice Sheldon's time in Germany after WWII, published in the November 16, 1946 edition of *The New Yorker*.

Tiptree Jr., James. *Brightness Falls from the Air*. New York: Orb, 1985. Print.

One of two Tiptree novels, and in my opinion, somewhat underrated.

Tiptree Jr., James. *Byte Beautiful: Eight Science Fiction Stories*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1985. Print.

Includes an introduction by Michael Bishop.

Tiptree Jr., James. "Forever to a Hudson Bay Blanket." *Fantastic* August 1972. 58-71. Print.

Magazine warped with some water damage. Illustrated by Joe Staton.

Tiptree Jr., James. *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever*. San Francisco: Tachyon, 2004. Print.

The most recent and perhaps most widely distributed/known of Tiptree's anthologies. Compiled posthumously by Jeffrey D. Smith, this is the anthology I first read, though it's one of the newest editions to my collection. I actually disagree on some points in Michael Swanwick's introduction, I think he's unfairly dismissive towards Tip's later works, but I'm also not that big of a fan of the short story "Her Smoke Rose Up Forever," so what do I know?

Tiptree Jr., James. "In Midst of Life." *Fantasy & Science Fiction* November 1987. 6-26. Print.

Tiptree Jr., James. *Meet Me At Infinity*. ed. Jeffrey D. Smith. New York: Tor, 2000. Print.

Includes out of print and uncollected fiction and nonfiction by Tiptree, including an interview Smith conducted with Tiptree in 1970, and Tiptree's contributions to a Women in Science Fiction Symposium in Smith's fanzine.

Tiptree Jr., James. *Out of the Everywhere and Other Stories*. New York: Del Ray, 1981. Print.

Due to an unfortunate mishap with an online bookseller who doesn't understand the importance of using stickers with gentle adhesives on books, there is some damage to the bottom of the spine.

Tiptree Jr, James. *Star Songs of an Old Primate*. New York: Del Ray, 1978. Print.

Due to an unfortunate mishap with an online bookseller who doesn't understand the importance of using stickers with gentle adhesives on books, there is some damage to the bottom of the spine. Yes, this happened with two books. Yes, I was extremely cross with myself. Yes, I am never buying anything from this seller again. This book also includes an introduction by Ursula K. LeGuin.

Tiptree Jr., James. *Ten Thousand Light-Years from Home*. New York: Ace, 1973. Print.

Ten Thousand Light-Years from Home was Tip's first published short story anthology, and perhaps the one with the trickiest publication history, at least in terms of tracking down a first edition and with different publisher errors that litter different printings. The first edition doesn't actually appear to have an ISBN number, not one that's listed. The book has also been published as "10,000 Light-Years From Home" and if I recall correctly, in some editions the hyphen between "light" and "years" is dropped. On the copyright page of the first edition, the title "Birth of a Salesman" is written as "Death of a Salesman," so I know (or am at least fairly confident) that I have a first edition, but not a first printing.

Gregg Press released a hardcover edition of TTYLH in June 1976 that contained an essay by Gardner Dozois examining Tiptree's work from a critical angle. This essay isn't just nearly impossible to find, but it's also terribly interesting from a scholarship standpoint, as it was written before Tiptree's identity became generally known, and thus provides an untempered view of Tiptree's work when Tiptree was thought to be a man. Though I don't own the Gregg Press edition (it's prohibitively expensive, clocking at a minimum of \$60, and also exceedingly rare), I do have a copy of the introductory essay courtesy of the fine people at UC Riverside's Eaton Collection. I only own a pdf scan of the essay, which is why it isn't included in this bibliography, but I thought it worth a mention.

Tiptree Jr., James. "The Color of Neanderthal Eyes." *Fantasy & Science Fiction* May 1988. 8-78. Print.

Tiptree Jr., James. *The Starry Rift*. New York: Tor, 1986. Print.

Book club edition. The Starry Rift contains three short stories threaded together with a framing device, a unique collection for Tip. These stories all take place in her Rift universe, which isn't too terribly well defined, but you can pick up which stories are set in it pretty quickly through a few key references here and there.

The best short story in my opinion here is probably “The Only Neat Thing To Do,” which is a story of alien friendship and tough terrible decisions, it’s simultaneously heartwarming and horrifically depressing: half a particularly good episode of Arthur, half “The Cold Equations.”

Tiptree Jr., James. *Up the Walls of the World*. New York: Berkley Putnam, 1978. Print.

I actually own two identical copies of this book -- at least, they’re identical as far as I’ve been able to tell. I’ve only included one on this bibliography because I felt that including both might be a bit excessive. This is the book club edition of the novel.

Tiptree Jr., James. *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*. New York: Del Ray, 1975. Print.

Includes the infamous forward by Robert Silverberg, “Who is Tiptree, What is He?”, in which Silverberg dismisses the speculation that Tiptree was a woman as “absurd.” Followed immediately, in my edition, by a note written by Silverberg after Tiptree’s identity was made known sheepishly redacting those statements. I’d love to get my hands on a first edition that doesn’t include that note, though the publication of WWO and the discovery of Tip’s identity are close enough together that I’m not sure such an edition exists still. This volume is a second edition.

Zebrowski, George, ed. *Synergy: New Science Fiction, vol. 2*. New York: Harvest, 1988. Print.

Includes “Backwards, Turn Backwards.”