

“A second moon”: Engendering Popular American Science Fiction from Lilith Lorraine to the 1960s

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Abstract

Recent SF criticism has dug up a number of narrative texts belonging to the pre- WWII popular American tradition written by women, most of them employing male or ambiguous pen names. In *Sisters of Tomorrow* (2016) Yaszek and Sharp collect an impressive list of novellas and short stories published from the 1920s to the early 1940s, among them the utopian romance “Into the 28th century” by Lilith Lorraine (1930), whose lively visionary details and striking failures are examined in this essay. On the whole, in less than two decades, opposite generic approaches are developed by other women writers: in “Shambleau” (1933) L.C. Moore mixes gothic features (with unusual erotic undertones) and a Martian landscape reminiscent of the Western setting, while in “Space Episode” (1941) Lesie Perri employs a minimalist space travel plot to stress the heroic role of a female astronaut.

In the late 1940s and in the 1950s fantasy and interplanetary romance on one hand, and a realistic domestic scene, ridden by Cold War and radioactive fall out anxieties, on the other, are favourite modes both in Leigh Brackett’s and in Judith Merrill’s fiction. The role of Merrill, a ‘nurturing mother’ of feminist science fiction is taken into due consideration, and projected into the 1960s, a decade bringing to life a new gendered literary consciousness culminating in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).