

Foreword to the Special Issue on Disability Studies

Bodyminds, Science Fiction, and Disability Studies

By **Sami Schalk**

Science fiction is fundamentally about imagining alternatives for human and non-human bodyminds,¹ about what these beings could do, could be, someday—for better or for worse. No matter how much a text is about spaceships, time travel machines, or other forms of futuristic technology, it is also about the bodyminds, the people, who imagine, create, use, experience, and potentially abuse these technologies. When we use science fiction to consider who is and is not human or sentient, to explore what aspects of humanity we want to save or dispose of, to question the norms and practices of our society by comparing it to a literally alien one, we are engaging questions of (dis)ability.

(Dis)ability is a term I use to refer to the historically and culturally specific social system of mental, physical, and behavioral norms which determine who is considered disabled and nondisabled and how we treat those whose bodyminds fall outside of the norm. Of course, disabled and nondisabled are just the terms we currently use to describe these categories of normative and non-normative bodyminds; these terms could change in the future as could our understanding of what constitutes ability and disability; indeed they already have. Current medical and bodymind technologies, from insulin to laser eye surgery, from psychiatric medications to high-tech prosthetics, have already changed the way we understand certain bodymind differences as disabling or not. Indeed, issues of (dis)ability are at the heart of what much science fiction explores and as I argue in my book, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, “Disability studies can provide speculative fiction critics additional language and frameworks to discuss the multiple ways in which texts challenge normative assumptions about the possibilities and meanings of bodyminds” (Schalk 22).

This special issue of *Journal of Science Fiction* is an important moment for the inclusion of disability

studies in science fiction studies and for the increased, serious engagement with science fiction in disability studies. It is part of a growing body of work which helps us understand how this non-realist genre comments upon and offers new ways of thinking about (dis)ability as a social system.² Further, as more openly disabled writers produce their own works of science fiction, we are witnessing a particularly exciting moment for disability in science fiction production, as well as criticism. This special issue provides essential critical perspectives and frameworks for understanding these science fictional representations of disability and ability in old and new texts alike, from Philip K. Dick's *Clans of the Alphane Moon* and Isaac Asimov's *Robot* series to Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and contemporary Chinese and Italian science fictions. The range of the topics within, including illness, scarring as a coalitional tool, neurodiversity, and anti-psychiatry, to name a few, similarly demonstrates both what is possible and how much more work there is to do on (dis)ability in science fiction. The work here is fresh and essential to the science fiction studies as our world continues to change and the fiction produced within it changes as well.

Notes

¹ I use the term bodyminds to “refer to the enmeshment of the mind and body, which are typically understood as interacting and connected, yet distinct entities... The term bodymind insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult, if not impossible to clearly discern in most cases” (Schalk 8). Schalk, S (2018). *Bodyminds reimagined: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in black women's speculative fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

² See, for example, Allan, K (2013). *Disability in science fiction: Representations of technology as cure*. Palgrave Macmillan; Vanderhooft, J. (ed.). (2013). *Shattering ableist narratives*. Aqueduct Press.



Bodyminds, Science Fiction, and Disability Studies, continued

References

- Allan, K (2013). *Disability in science fiction: Representations of technology as cure*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schalk, S (2018). *Bodyminds reimaged: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in black women's speculative fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
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