

Alexandra Pierce and Alisa Krasnostein (eds), *Letters to Tiptree*, Twelfth Planet Press, Australia, 2015; pp. 361, RRP \$24.95 (paperback).

Alice Sheldon was a writer who “called into question the entire notion of what is ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ in fiction” (p.312), and a woman whose life “tested the limits of what a woman could do and be in a man’s world” (p.6). Adopting the male penname James Tiptree Jr in 1967 allowed Sheldon to achieve what was quite phenomenal for a female science fiction writer at the time. Her stories were widely published and read, won prestigious awards and critical attention, and her body of work was praised as “almost unparalleled in the genre for originality, power and consistent quality” (p.44). She enjoyed the freedom of writing under a male name for around a decade, even using the persona of Tiptree to advocate for more female writers to be included in anthologies and to speak out about society’s treatment of women. Tiptree stated in 1975: “Women are human beings who have been drastically oppressed, deprived and warped out of shape by our male-dominated and largely lunatic culture” (p.176). Ironically, Tiptree was able to speak powerfully and with authority about women, until they found out he was one. In 1977, he was unmasked as “nothing but an old lady from Virginia” (p.135), and without his masculinity, “lost all credibility” (p.45). The scandal of Sheldon’s gender took centre stage and rendered Tiptree’s celebrated body of work “all but invisible” (p.45). The “male readers fell away” (p.303), and the work “sank into an undeserved obscurity” (p.306). Sadly, many contemporary science fiction professionals today are unfamiliar with Tiptree’s work (p.45). However, Sheldon remains a figure of significance and “enduring inspiration” (p.122) to feminist critics and contemporary female science fiction writers—who constitute the vast majority of contributors to this fascinating volume, *Letters to Tiptree*.

Sheldon was not only a brilliant author, but also a devoted letter-writer—keeping up correspondence as James Tiptree Jr, as well as her less successful female pseudonym Raccoona Sheldon, and under her own name, too, once her identity had been revealed. *Letters to Tiptree* pays homage not just to Sheldon but also to the art of letter writing, whereby contributors each write a letter to Sheldon to mark the centenary of her birth. The book is divided into four parts: the first and main section is a series of letters to Tiptree/Sheldon from contemporary writers and critics, bookended by two poems. The second section shares selected transcriptions from original letters between Sheldon and Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ. The third section includes reprints of academic material about Tiptree, and in the afterword the editors write their own letters.

Predominantly, this is a collection of tremendously intimate and moving epistles, full of passion and insight into the difficulty of writing while female,

particularly in the traditionally male dominated genre of science fiction. There is an outpouring of recognition and appreciation for Sheldon's contribution to the field and her pioneering role in proving the legitimacy of women writers. The overwhelming refrain of is 'Thank You'. The letters are signed warmly, "in solidarity" (p.147), with "everlasting gratitude and love" (p.99), and "deepest admiration and greatest affection" (p.125). The best ones maintain the illusion of being genuinely addressed to Sheldon/Tiptree while also being an enjoyable and edifying read for a wider audience. The least interesting are those that seem preoccupied in relating their own stories with unconvincing relevance to Sheldon's, or that take liberties in speculating about deeply personal aspects of her private life.

What was arguably most exciting about Tiptree's work was its discussion of gender roles and how it managed to engage men in those conversations. At a time when her fellow women writers' work was often dismissed as "girls writing science fiction for girls" (p.13), Sheldon was able to use Tiptree to infiltrate the bastions of male readership. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for this volume. One stark disappointment of *Letters to Tiptree* is the lack of gender diversity among its contributors. The negligible male contribution to this subject area may not be surprising, but it is a silence that speaks piercingly loud. Either men are not particularly interested in Tiptree, or perhaps the volume's call for submissions did not adequately reach them (although the geographical spread of contributors does seem commendably wide). Admittedly, the call was open for only three weeks from 18 May to 8 June 2015. With such a short turnaround, and being a small Australian-based publishing house with an all-women team, it is possible that news of the publication may not have reached a great number of men in the field. Almost all the contributors identify as women, including some transgender, and a minority bi-gendered or neutrally gendered. Just one of forty letters is penned by someone who identifies as male and uses a masculine pronoun in his biography. This sole representative of the patriarchy also happens to be the only contributor whose letter is not actually addressed to Tiptree at all, but to Bulgaria's first published female speculative fiction writer, using Sheldon's success at writing while female as an instructive example to advise the poor woman on how she might have done a better job.

The editors of *Letters to Tiptree* hope the book will "inspire and bring joy"(viii). It does. However, in the tradition of Tiptree's complex and contradictory bleak and beautiful stories—while there are triumphs to be celebrated within these pages, there is no easy happy ending. The world of science fiction writing is "still soaked in sexism and double standards" (p.111). Contributors recognise that the work Tiptree started is far from done. Tehani Wessely says it is "beyond frustration, bordering on devastating, to consider how much things have remained the same" (p.132). Karen Miller thinks it's "shameful" that Sheldon had to adopt a male pseudonym for her stories, but believes it was the only way to ensure her work was judged on its merit alone, and notes that "even now, women sometimes do the same, and for the same reasons" (p.167). Stephanie Burgis sees the "old ridiculous debate" being brought up in the field again: "Are women as good at science fiction and fantasy as men? Is it worth picking up a novel by a female writer if you're a man?"

(p.135). While Gwyneth Jones consoles readers by reminding us that Sheldon “didn’t prove science fiction can change. But ... did make any bloke who says women can’t do it look like an idiot. Permanently.” (p. 8). Theodora Goss laments the difficulty in finding Tiptree’s stories in print and declares a Complete Works of James Tiptree Jr overdue (p.18). I hope Twelfth Planet Press considers braving the growing “thickets of neglect and copyright issues” (p.112).

One feels that *Letters to Tiptree* is an extremely important book, but one also fears that, similar to the extraordinary woman who is its subject, it may disappear into obscurity all too soon, without receiving the wider attention and celebration it absolutely deserves.

Bronwyn Lovell - Flinders University