

Nisi Shawl

shows that Science Fiction can still challenge conventions

Rich Dana (Ricardo Feral)

a review of

Nisi Shawl, *Talk like a Man*. PM Press/Outspoken Authors series, 2019 pmpress.org

“My hair was not my own. My blood was not my own. My life was not my own. I am not free. I am a political prisoner on a North American game preserve.”

Thus began the 1989 science fiction story, “I Was a Teenage Genetic Engineer,” by an unknown author in an anthology by a little known indie publisher. The book was Autonomedia’s *Semiotext(e) SF*, and the author was Denise Angela Shaw.

The story was the first to be published by the “poetry editrix” of the fanzine PopReal, who also wrote under the nom de guerre, Celeste Oatmeal. The book was to become a milestone in the history of science fiction/speculative (SF) literature, and Celeste Oatmeal would evolve into Nisi Shawl, one of the genre’s most adventurous talents.

Fast forward 30 years and Nisi Shawl’s new book, *Talk Like A Man*, is the latest installment in the PM Press Outspoken Authors series. These affordable, pocket-sized paperbacks have featured authors such as Kim Stanley Robinson, Nalo Hopkinson, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Paul Krassner.

Although Nisi Shawl may not be as well-known as many of the other authors in the PM series, their work is very relevant and on point for the current moment. Classic genre themes like artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and time-travel are all re-examined through an intersectional lens to produce stories that will satisfy both seasoned SF readers as well as newcomers to the genre.

The collection is an excellent introduction to Nisi Shawl as a writer of speculative fiction as well as a person who thinks deeply about social issues. *Talk Like A Man* includes four previously uncollected short stories along with an essay, “Ifa: Reverence, Science and Social Technology,” and an interview, “The Fly in the Sugarbowl,” conducted by fellow SF writer Terry Bisson. Wisely, the editors have chosen not to include an introduction at the beginning of the book, allowing the reader to dive right into Shawl’s fiction.

The opening story, “Walk Like A Man,” takes on the alienated teen tropes of Young Adult fiction and turns them on their heads while effectively commenting on class and gender issues. “Women of the Doll” provides deep and thoughtful commentary about sex work, spirituality, and empowerment, all within the framework of a familiar SF storyline about a mysterious loner and a doll brought to life.

“Something More” takes on issues of race and class and the battle for the soul of a young pop star. The last and shortest story in the collection, “An Awfully Big Adventure,” is the outlier in the book. It is a meditation on illness that may be lost on some younger readers, but feels painfully close to those of us whose lives have been touched by cancer.

After covering some serious ground in the short-story selections, the non-fiction segments at the end of the book allow the reader to take a deep breath and get to know Nisi Shawl as a person. Shawl writes of integrating their personal spiritual practice of Ifa (a West African animist faith) with the scientific method and writing science fiction.

They write: “In addition to the categories of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ science fiction, a new one labeled ‘ethereal SF’ would be born, focusing on science derived from spiritually mandated investigations rather than discoveries in conventional physics or biology. Or perhaps we’d witness the fading of literature’s taxonomical divisions between science fiction and its more widely accepted and well-to-do sister genres, fantasy, and magical realism. Already this division is problematic, questioned by many authors and thoughtful readers—particularly those familiar with Ifa and other religions rooted in indigenous worldviews.”

In the final article, interviewer Terry Bisson asks Shawl about life, writing, and thoughts on popular culture. The interview questions are broader than they are deep, and the interview seems abbreviated. Any one of the questions could have spawned pages of follow-up discussion. It leaves the reader wanting to know more about Shawl’s life and world-view.

Still, it does provide a taste of their personality and sense of humor. Ultimately though, the brevity of the interview does not diminish the book; it adds to the realization that we are reading a primer on the work of Nisi Shawl. The extensive bibliography that follows encourages the reader to explore more of their writing.

After reading *Talk Like A Man*, readers who are interested in diving more deeply into Shawl’s work might want to pick up their 2016 novel, *Everfair*. An alternative history of the “Belgian” Congo which the author describes as “AfroRetroFuturist,” *Everfair* combines the aesthetics of Afrofuturism with the stylistic approach of the Steampunk science fiction sub-genre.

Shawl’s short stories can be found in countless SF monthlies, anthologies, and zines. Also, they have served as editor of several important collections, including *New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Colour* and *The WisCon Chronicles: Writing and Racial Identity*.

Readers can learn more about Nisi Shawl at their website, nisishawl.com. For more on the PM Press “Outspoken Authors” series, visit pmpress.org.

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