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## Andromeda (disambiguation) by Mark A. McCutcheon

~4700 words, 23 minutes reading time Issue 1 (Winter, February 2023)

> One of life's finest pleasures: discovering a complete series of novels as an adult, devouring them to the end, and discovering that, while you'd have happily inhabited the author's world for many more volumes, you are eminently satisfied with the conclusion. (Doctorow, on Temeraire)

We're running out of bookish boys to grow into bookish men (and they are missed). (Paul 76)

Fandoms, like academia, drive education: both cultivate specialized expertise and promise immersive enjoyment; both host niche conferences on strange topics, with stranger wares and dress codes; most importantly, both also stimulate passion. I went back to grad school in 2001 to parlay an *afición* for Toronto's rave scene into a study of the politics of dancing; at my first symposium, during that September-shadowed winter of 2002, George Elliott Clarke made a comment that became a mantra for my work since: *Critique is a labour of love*.

Sometimes academia and fandoms inform and inspire each other: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is the Cultural Studies field's most studied text (and a touchstone for librarians); scholarship on fandom ranges from Janice Radway's work on women readers of romance novels to Rhiannon Bury's study of streaming TV audiences. Reciprocally, fandoms engage with research that impacts them; a 2016 article Bob Barnetson and I co-wrote on unions in science fiction raises

questions subsequently taken up by SF fandom—and, at a 2018 WorldCon panel, by some of the authors we'd written about (see Rokne et al).

Yet other times, academe and fandom circle each other more warily, like a binary system of denial. They occupy divergent nodes in the networks of knowledge and power under capital's empire. One as an institution for producing and reproducing authoritative knowledge; the other is more a "structure of feeling" (Williams 23) for organizing a scene or community around a shared repertoire of cultural texts and practices: a "canon." A noun whose dictionary definitions all illustrate academe's and fandom's discursive affinities and historical complicities, canon can mean a general rule; a corpus of works deemed authoritative or sacred; a part of Roman Catholic mass; and a music composition of overlapping repetitions of one melody.

An autobiography gestures to the world of a reading self. It signals the complicated ways of reading and interpretation that are necessary under conditions of coloniality. (Brand, Autobiography 8)

Conflicts and contradictions of class and culture—as well as colonialism (a founding rationale for English literary studies btw; see Hunter)—keep scholarship and fandom separate; for example, academia everywhere enforces a professional expectation that scholarly writing adopt an even tone, eschew enthusiasm. I've been advised by more than one editor to tone it down, most recently regarding an ebullient draft review of James S.A. Corey's *The Expanse*. With that editor's call I agreed. Besides, what Doctorow says above about reading Novik's nine-volume roman-fleuve sums up better what I'd say about reading *The Expanse*. (Also, *Temeraire* just shot up my must-read list.)

Between the groves of academe and the troves of fandom, how and where do we hold space for ebullience, for *le plaisir de lire, la joie de texte*? Ain't that close to love? Before trying to connect these dots to reading *The Expanse*, let's pause to briefly summarize its premise and story:

*The Expanse* takes place some three hundred years from now, positing a postcolonial solar system that stretches from a climate-changed Earth and its moon, centrally governed by the United Nations, to an independent Mars, engaged in a Cold War with Earth, to the asteroid belt and gas giant moons, where "Belters," les damnés du vide, labour on the colonial periphery in resource extraction for "the Inners" who exploit and oppress them. Belt governance beyond corporate charters is loosely organized around the Outer Planetary Alliance, or OPA, an ambiguous collective that "had begun its life more like a labor union than a nation" (*Abaddon's Gate* 183) ... *The Expanse's* interplanetary, postcolonial setting is premised on the novum of an "Epstein drive" that enables fast (but not light-speed) rocketry. To launch the plot, a second novum emerges: the "protomolecule," an artifact of a vanished alien civilization, discovered on a moon of Saturn and appropriated for research and development by private interests seeking to weaponize

it. How the solar system's powers respond to the destabilizing effects of the protomolecule technology, competing to control or destroy it, drives the series' storyline over nine novels, which also work as three linked trilogies. In the TV series, which the co-authors had a close hand in as writers and producers, the story changes in many creative ways, and its story arc focuses on a tight and cogent adaptation of the first six novels. (Clitheroe and McCutcheon ¶2)

The first novel, *Leviathan Wakes* (2011), opens with two events that ignite the novel's plot and the series' main story arc. A handful of workers from a cargo ship answer an unknown ship's SOS; and on Ceres, a station in the Belt's largest asteroid, a washed-up security detective gets tasked to find a missing girl, a reluctant corporate heiress turned Belter freedom fighter, whose story starts the narrative: Julie Mao.

I binged *The Expanse* TV series, then burned through the books, surprised by my own engrossment. But unsurprised too: the eruption of a novel plague into an already fallen world of cascading calamities made for a radically futureless moment prime for finally cracking that nine-volume behemoth I'd been putting off. It seemed a good *diem* to *carpe* for easy travel to a well-built world with a state-of-the-art story—and an extrapolated future not so much plausible as familiar. Those apocalyptic weeks marked the start of this post-apocalyptic timeline—"post" as in "aftermath" not "done with" (I'm still pretty far from feeling post anything COVID-19, though it would be pretty to think so). A war-torn world rocked suddenly sideways by pandemic is a familiar premise from other SF and horror classics like Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* and Stephen King's *The Stand* (which I only read first for Hallowe'en 2019). King's post-apocalyptic setting for survival and struggle is time-scarce: "during these new days, there never seemed to be time to sit and have a good long conversation with a book" (822). But the post-COVID time soup has furnished unexpected swaths of time, time you could steal back from the capital that had always previously stolen it from us. Freed up time means reading time.

Cultivating conversations between readers and authors is work that fans and scholars share; both are sort of "societies of the friends of the text":

Society of the Friends of the Text: its members would have nothing in common (for there is no necessary agreement on the texts of pleasure) but their enemies : Fools of all kinds, who decree foreclosure of the text and of its pleasure, either by cultural conformism or by intransigent rationalism (suspecting a "mystique" of literature) or by political moralism or by criticism of the signifier or by snide vacuity or by destruction of the discourse, loss of verbal desire. (Barthes 14)

I've long taught Barthes' theory of "la morte d'auteur" as a foundation for close reading, literary criticism's core methodology. Barthes argues that the author, having released their "hideous

progeny" (as Mary Shelley nicknamed *Frankenstein*) into the wilds of public opinion, cedes their claim to state what the work "means" to the reader. Barthes thus empowers the reader to make what they will of what they read: every act of reading is an act of creative rewriting. But the reader is not exactly sovereign in this exercise: less a subject *speaking through language* than a subject through which language *speaks*. The reader becomes a subject determined and overdetermined by history; this is also a tenet of Marxist theory. Ideology immerses and inculcates the human subject in systems of power as invisibly as water immerses a fish. This sense of historically determined "subjection" emerges in *Babylon's Ashes*, in the quotation from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which, as re-read by the pastor Anna Volovodov, ends the novel: "...so in history the difficulty of recognizing the subjection of personality to the laws of space, time, and cause lies in renouncing the direct feeling of the independence of one' own personality" (529).

What is an autobiography? What can fairly be said to lie within its bounds, share in its purpose? (Burgess 116)

On first watching *The Expanse* TV series in 2018, I got why it had been recommended it to me, amidst that unions-and-SF research. The series also appealed in ways I couldn't make out until I learned that Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck (*The Expanse*'s co-authors, publishing under the pseudonym James S. A. Corey) started developing *The Expanse* as a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG); and that their play-testing produced characters, plot points, and the story's main arc. The render depth of The Expanse's worldbuilding, the coherence and consistency of that world's "rules," the well-wrought story, and the "relatability" of its characters all bespeak the work's foundations in TTRPG play and collaboration. Successful writing, likewise, creates an experience built on "the lure to character/reader identification" (Rooke 24).

In the cavernous and cold winter castle, in some hallway where love's never been, your company and you especially are all surprised; your blood rises on suddenly seeing, standing in the threshold of the wide, flung-open door, with the wild winter night outside a vast void of cold death at her back, dressed for the weather in fragrant furs, frost-rimed mail and plate, and trussed in musky leather, snow beading on her bosom and melting in the long strawberry blonde hair she tousles out of her helmet, her eye walking still in beauty but now come back haunted, your lover, here she comes your beautiful world, swirling galactically into the shadow-vaulted hall, and back into your dream until blue crystal juts from your mouth and wakes you, each to each.

As Constance Rooke notes, the "lure to identification" is a writing strategy integral to the "theory of intimacy": "not as a full account of the reading act, but as a reminder of feelings both friendly and hostile that we should not be afraid to admit" (12). An institution builder of

Canadian literature, whose life centred writers and writing, Rooke understandably contests Barthes' "needlessly bloody" theory with her pointedly more nurturing one.

Rooke labels Canadian writers like Margaret Laurence as "open" and Alice Munro as "warm". These characterizations apply to Corey's professedly "accessible" style (Franck and Chatham), which encourages "a strong feeling of intimacy ... between reader, character and author" (Rooke 23); with which "the reader feels much closer to the characters, much more comfortable in their society—as if the hostess, in introducing us to other guests, had made a special point of opening the channels to intimacy" (25). In Corey's case, we might add the opening of other, related channels: to personal transformation; coalition-building; restorative justice; and other more expansive forms of social relations. From Miller to Avasarala to Tanaka, major characters in The Expanse, together with the performative fandom the franchise fosters, demonstrate both the applications and implications of Rooke's theory. Echoing Rowland McMaster's 1976 argument—that reading expands the reader's sympathies and horizons (a theoretical chestnut half a century old, perhaps, but one freshly touted in recent years as a neuroscientific "discovery")-Rooke's "theory of intimacy" anticipates literary theory's "affective turn" and, like McMaster, eloquently articulates the social and personal value of learning to read closely and critically: "[A] sample (however atypical) of the writer's sensibility has nonetheless been presented to the reader, who will make of it what she can. And this is rather like what happens in ordinary social contact: we respond to a performance, as when we listen to a dinner companion's story. ... We choose our friends partly on the basis of how such stories are told" (10).

Having shared some scholarly context for reflecting on fandom, some complementary fandom also informs my scholarship includes *The Expanse* Geeks Facebook group and the Archive Of Our Own fanfic repository: the first social media fan groups I joined, this was in 2021. *The Expanse* Geeks page's sign-up includes a screener that asks you to declare which character you most identify with (an arch nod to the series' TTRPG roots). I typed HOLDEN, to get on with it. But if I'd given myself a second to think about it, I'd have typed MILLER.

did I dream you dreamed about me (This Mortal Coil)

After I first read the series in 2020, I reviewed my notes and a whole lot of dog-eared pages, looking for Miller's excellent, character-establishing line: "God help a man who outlives his vices." I only found it when, after learning of the untimely passing of the writer Steven Heighton, I revisited *The Waking Comes Late*—and found the line there instead (35), in the last book I'd read before cracking *Leviathan Wakes*. It's still a great line for Miller.

In *Leviathan Wakes*, the first character you meet is Julie. As the story unfolds, Miller pieces together her story. Finishing chapter two, I paused on a detail I hadn't noticed when watching the show: "Juliette Andromeda Mao. He read through her work history, her academic records" (25). Julie's middle name: how'd I not make this connection before? Andromeda is also the

middle name of your first love IRL. Absolutely true.

To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize "how it really was." It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger. (Benjamin)

Who could forget a first love's name as memorable as that belonging to a mythic princess, a constellation, a galaxy? Especially since that the princess of my teen dreams bore two space opera heroines' names, the other she shared with a figure already famous by the '80s when we met.

But I regress.

#### 2023

Some thirty years after you used to do this, alone you approach your bookshelf and pull down Dragons of Autumn Twilight, and

#### 1987

—you're thirteen, in your shared bedroom in the family's townhouse in the new subdivisions sprawling north towards Steeles and beyond—

you hold the book in both hands, spine between your fingers, like you're in church with a hymnal and all of the singers' close your eyes, exhale slowly, and

—bring the book to your face and fan the pages, the scent of her hands left on the thumbsoftened pages like—

library dust, now, the only olfactory trace of it now a memory of

—lilac and cocoa butter, the chlorine they put in the neighbourhood pool, sunscreen and girl sweat, a phenomenal rock dropped straight onto your face and into your five dreams of teenage heaven. The book smells like the sun: its scent sets you on fire. Reluctantly, you replace the book on the shelf in the space vacated by its sequel, which she's reading now—Juliette Andromeda Mao. (Corey, Leviathan Wakes 25).

Before pulling at these threads any further, I must issue a matrimonial disclaimer here. I've been delightedly wed for decades to a woman who's the mother of my dragons—I mean, my daughters; a woman who's the muse of my filthiest publications (see the Works Cited). What Nick Cave says of how he first saw his wife (give or take some references) evokes how I saw mine the night I knew I wanted to wed her:

when she came walking in, all the things I had obsessed over for all the years—pictures of movies stars... Anita Ekberg in the fountain, Ali MacGraw in her black tights, images from the TV when I was a kid, Barbara Eden and ...Miss World competitions, Marilyn Monroe and ... Bo Derek ... Bolshoi ballerinas and Russian gymnasts, Wonder Woman and Barbarella and supermodels and Page 3 girls, all the endless, impossible fantasies... girls at the ... pool lying on the hot concrete, Courbet's Origin Of The World, Bataille's bowl of milk...all the stuff I had heard and seen and read...advertising and TV commercials, billboards and fashion spreads and Playmate of the Month...all the continuing, never-ending drip feed of erotic data came together at that moment in one great big crash bang and I was lost to her and that was that. (qtd. in Forsyth and Pollard)

Her love's why I'm living, so what follows here isn't any pining for "one that got away." I count myself astronomically lucky to have learned how vastly first love can differ from true love. What follows here reaches out to one illuminating, locality-defying data point, star-born seed-crystal in my own never-ending Eros feed.

Writers' works speaking to readers feels like writers talking with us (as Rooke writes), when each reader is making of the same work a unique meaning, making it their own story (as Barthes argues). Expanding this already vast parliament swirling between readers and writers are writers' conversations with other writers: *"The Expanse* exists as part of a conversation," Abraham and Franck say (*Leviathan Wakes*); elsewhere, they elaborate: "The literature of science fiction is—and has been since its beginning—a conversation between writers and their work across time. ... We all owe debts to the other writers in our field—the ones who came before us, and the ones writing along with us" (Corey qtd. in Mixon, pp. 5-6). Conversations among writers mean much more than talking about writing; such conversations can take place in the writing itself:

"Holden," he continued as he started off, "is in Mount Zion Hospital with a laser track through his spine. He'll be there for a month at least." (Dick 23)

"Who were you talking to?" "Ghost of Christmas past," Holden said, forcing himself to sit up. (Corey, Cibola 448)

Philip K. Dick's William Holden in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? may not be *The Expanse* protagonist's only namesake (a certain Salinger crumb comes to mind), but elsewhere Corey quotes the Blade Runner scene that immortalizes Dick's Holden:

> "So tell me only the good things you remember about your mother." At my horrified look, he smiled and waved the comment away. "No, I'm joking. I don't need to know that." (Corey, Memory's 212)

In Scott's 1982 film, as in Dick's 1968 source novel, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,

Holden is a cop shot by an android while testing whether it's human; so the LAPD, in Dick's postnuclear 2021, replaces Holden with formerly retired detective Rick Deckard, tasked to "retire" the fugitive android and its fellow "replicant" workers who have fled a colony world and come to Earth. I recall being twelve years old and intrigued enough by *Blade Runner* to read Dick's novel, which explains nothing about the movie, and deepened my perplexity; but I also recall this was the novel in which I first read a sex scene. The line that stays with me (maybe since it rhymes): "Afterward they enjoyed a great luxury: Rick had room service bring up coffee" (172). I remember where I was when I read this scene. Just the tenacity of that memory feels like a reason to let kids read—more than *let, encourage* and *excite* them to read—*whatever they want* to read. Just be open to their questions.

Further to conversations among writers, Larissa Lai's "rachel" (2010) responds directly to Dick and Scott with a long poem voiced by the eponymous android: "my favour / not mine to give / you threaten / i repeat / your desire // ... i float ghostly / a hot air incubus / made of breath and want" (29).

This recherche du temps perdu, to sort out why I'm a bit de trop on all things Expanse, reflects on a particular historical-material contingency (following Benjamin) in which genre fiction and TTRPGs converge or supercollide with adolescence, first love, Bildung. This recherche reaches back to the late 1980s, different times to come of age. Before the Internet (for most), between the monsters of the Cold War and the maelstrom of HIV's then-novel plague, among my friends and peers a Carpe diem ethos prevailed (the 1989 film Dead Poets Society captures that Zeitgeist). And in the middle-class, multicultural Toronto I grew up in—"the city / that's never happened before" (Brand, thirsty 11)-by the time Baywatch aired it couldn't compare to the incredible spectacle up the street at the neighbourhood swimming pool, an isla bonita where summers turned me upside down, one absolute beginner of a sunburnt boy, eyes completely open but nervous all the same amidst an embarrassment of vixens: stunningly voluptuous, blithely tanned, dazzling talent, all around my age but all unapproachable as Venus. And anchoring this fantastical pantheon was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen (I mean, a total #HuttSlayer smokeshow, bro) who, with her galactic middle name, dropped on my life like a pheromone-coated dirty bombshell. Shocked me awake. Flipped all my switches. Ate me like a room.

I reached out, more than once. When we did connect, our young lovers' discourse oozed with nicknames and references from novels we'd both read. As we drew close my infatuation only grew. "It was more hormones and hubris," as *The Expanse*'s Ashford reminisces, "speeding back to Ceres. Yeah, to see a girl" (Phang). But that first love ended, as first loves must, in heartbreak.

#### 1991

-What do you want? she had asked. The rain falls so hard that the cottages lining the lane drown in dark sheets, billowing blankets of rain concealing the trees and cars and porches.

In the bone-white light of the lone street lamp, the falling rain looks a snow flurry. We huddle together tinder the light and the words she said a moment ago, in the field, her face low over mine, hidden by her long blonde hair: -There's one more place we have to go.

I guess we fell apart in the usual way; let's just say going with my first love all the way to Eros sent me on a trip that ended with me undone and cratering somewhere venereal. I would take years to understand how we ended was a gift. I learned other things about myself. Who and what I'd want in a lover. (The first time I saw the woman I'd wed as someone I'd want had been poolside, too; like schools, pools are desiring machines and, thus, a vital public good.) How I'd been a romantic ass. How I had misunderstood and hurt her. Did I ask too much? (More than a lot.) How I was not what she needed. How sex isn't love. And how to become someone else. I fumbled rebounds, didn't give dating much chance, became a disappointing boyfriend to people who didn't deserve it. Takes a long time, learning how to be a better man. A quarter-century into marriage to my true love—*my love is a pure love*—I'm still light-years from being close to done that study.And my wife get more gorgeous every year.

#### 1995

Steer her among horn-rimmed hipsters with glasses of the house red to the beige stairs, the auditorium doors, a deepening hush; steer among murmurs and rustlings of papers, past lipstick and tan-scented camera bags to your assigned seats pinched together like lips. Her hand clammy, or is it yours, feeling her palm always itching for that constant blade. File past the firing line of khakis, crossed stockings, standard-issue black shoes. Pry open and sink into your seats. The lights fade around Acker as she speaks.

-So I've been rethinking sex lately, thinking about vibrations and language, Acker tells the Harbourfront audience. Haloed by stadium-grade spotlighting, her close-cropped skull shines like a moon. Acker commands the stage, statuesque, stricken. The excerpt she reads from *My Mother: Demonology* machetes a clear path into your head's messy jungle.

This writing reaches out to understand love, fandom, and learning; how they enrich and enlarge one another; how history's accidents become Bildung ("a process of personal and cultural maturation"); and how the hauntings of a man in his old age feed on reads opening doors to new lives.

The reading enjoyment that The Expanse reignited hasn't stayed reserved for just that work. I've since read books (by Maria Dhavana Headley, N.K. Jemisin, Colson Whitehead, and Philip Pullman, for example) that I've thrilled to as much as to *The Expanse*. (Well, almost.) That reading started flipping these switches to see what all it would turn on, what it might bring back to life. A lot, turns out. Like *le plaisir* de lire. A big big love.

> At indigo dusk, among the decommissioned silos, your true love meets you; she's dressed not for a party but for a ball; you're

dressed like you don't know how to. Take her hand in yours as you head for the red field where the generation ship has parked. You've already said goodbyes to your bewildered parents. From here you can hear the DJs spinning up the drum of the dance floor. The door search is a joke, and there's no vac suit check. The walls vanish into darkness above, festooned with elevators, balconies, catwalks, conduits, and access ladders. Out in the booming, grooving din of hive-mind orchestrated beats, the floor pins you down as you circle each other, your steps correct, now magnetic, now ballistic, get down to get up, jump up and lose gravity; time moves the ghost in her. You don't feel this as any falling thing; you dig dancing but can't wait to quit this scene. In a park on a bluff overlooking the domed ravine, sit with her apart from the crowd that has gathered to interrogate the mayor. Stars sting a sky that glows in the violet relief of a Martian eclipse. You leave the meeting for a finity pond where crickets and katydids dub the undergrowth; you run threadless from the bank into the shallows, your skin slips together silver, wading and then swimming into a possible future.

The chance encounter with my first love's middle name, so out of context here, with the memory bank it opens, a waltz dragging its tail in the sea, suggests a formal connection between, then, a person in whom my teenage eye beheld the paragon of human beauty and, now, a reading that my critic's eye holds as an exemplar of novel form. You can take the *plaisir* back.

That galactic middle name, encountered again after a span of some thirty years' time—a longfalling rock target-locked on Benjamin's angel of history—reminds me how an unlooked-for encounter can open a life to a new horizon, bend a life's arc, move it to fall somewhere rich and strange.

> Demand a better future. Why did you enlist? They didn't even give you the proper gas mask apparatus, just told you to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth—never vice versa. Well, if you're going to die in a gas attack black op the government's going to spring on the refugees, you might as well die in the fine company of this extraordinary woman. The craft isn't much to look at—just a lashed-together pair of airplane seats, like a flying sedan chair—but your brilliant, beautiful co-pilot climbs into the cockpit, dressed in rather less than combat fatigues, since hey it's your dream. As the chair lifts off and hovers toward the AO, you can think of a lot worse ways to go.

As for these fragments shored against my ruin, a further complication occurs to me. The daisychain sequence of the protomolecule's "simulations" in *The Expanse* first plants a simulation of Julie in Miller's head and a sim of Miller in Holden's head; and so much of this goes on that in *Tiamat's Wrath*, Holden says of Avasarala, "I feel like I built a little version of her in my head" then, to Nagata: "You ever have that feeling?" To which she replies, "I know the one" (516). Dubs of echoes, uncanny vibrations of resonance frequencies. And if I feel like I relate to Miller most, among *The Expanse*'s eminently relatable characters, then doesn't the feeling of being haunted or inhabited by Miller's ghost also put me in Holden's chair ?

*The Expanse*'s recurring motif of absent or dead characters as simulations haunting those they know becomes legible as, among other things, a metaphor for the conversations and connections engendered by reading, study, and fandom. "The most complex simulation in the history of your solar system is running right now so that we can pretend I'm here in the same room with you" (Corey, *Abaddon's* 264). A conversation with a good book doesn't end when you turn the last page; it follows you around, keeps talking to you.

Till human voices wake us, he thought, without quite being able to recall where the phrase came from. (Corey, Leviathan Wakes 520)

Hey, that mermaid stuff hits too close to home. Get out of my head, Miller.

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