

QueerSpace Ep. 2 - We're All Stories in the End

Music up and under

Erin: Hello! And welcome to QueerSpace, a limited series from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum and the same people who usually bring you AirSpace.

Sofia: I'm Sofia from the National Air and Space Museum, and my pronouns are she/her.

Erin: And I'm Erin, from The Story Collider. My pronouns are she/they.

QueerSpace features people and stories that have been historically and intentionally ignored at the intersection of aviation, space, *and* LGBTQ+ history and culture.

Music up and out

Erin: Fiction is often an escape for readers, a chance to live in a world that is different from our own.

Sofia: For an author, it can be a chance to create a reality that's a better and more diverse place, or use fiction to shine a spotlight on issues facing us in the real world.

Erin: Queer themes have been a part of science fiction for a long time: if you're imagining an entirely new world peopled by entirely new species why would you feel the need to keep our Earthen social constructs of gender and sexuality?

Sofia, you got to go to a real bookstore and talk to a bookseller about this, tell us more.

Sofia: I did get to go to a real bookstore! And it was really exciting, it's my local bookstore here in Northwest DC and I think the most exciting part was to get some great recommendations, which we'll here about in a second, and also to hear about their own experience seeing the impact that these stories have on the community and on the readers

Erin: I love books, I love bookstores, I'm so excited. Let's jump into that interview...

Music up and out

Hannah Oliver Depp: My name is Hannah Oliver Depp. She, her, they. And I am the owner of Loyalty Bookstores and the head buyer here.

Sofia Soto Sugar: Wow. And could you tell us a little bit more about Loyalty Bookstores in general and maybe describe the place for people that can't see it?

Hannah: Sure. Yes. Join me in a visual adventure. *Sofia laughs*

Our bookstore is an independent bookstore, meaning that the books chosen on the shelves are chosen by the staff who work here. So there's no sort of corporate overlord telling us what we should and should not shelve. And to that end, the goal of Loyalty Bookstores is to flip upside down who normally gets focused on in a bookstore. So Loyalty focuses on the full breadth of diversity of voices so that's disabled voices, immigrant voices, Black, brown, Indigenous, all people of color and especially queer folks.

We have tables piled high whether they're circular or long angular tables, old desks; we love to have merchandise on an antique desk. And we pile and pile the walls with face outs of books on floating shelves, on the walls. And then very, very tall, *laughs* brown and white bookcases with spines facing you lining our walls. Everything is piled to the ceiling.

There's a really beautiful merchandising, minimalist technique that has really become very popular in the last few years, and we might be the exact opposite of that. As beautiful as I find it, I always end up being a maximalist. We pile the books in because we just love them so much and we want everyone to dig into them.

Sofia: I love maximalism. There's no complaint here for me as a shopper, *both laugh* but it's also the colors. Add so much levity. I love it. I love what you've done with the place.

Hannah: Oh, thank you so much.

Sofia: Well, I guess getting into the real reason that we're here, we have a lot of questions.

Hannah: Great.

Sofia: Mostly, we want to talk a little bit about sci fi and queer themes in sci fi. So queer themes and characters have been popular in science fiction, at least since the sixties, and it's pretty early in popular literature for such a theme. So could you tell us a bit about

some of those early stories and maybe who and what themes were included? And I guess subsequently, what was left out?

Hannah: Yeah, our, you know, grand dame, I think Ursula K. Le Guin, you know, inarguably is, you know, the founding creator in a lot of people's minds of queer science fiction, but also Samuel R Delaney, who is wonderfully still producing amazing work and still teaching, who is a Black queer writer. And both of them just wrote into the future, partly the world that they lived in, but I think their imaginations were maybe a little bit bigger than those who are, quote unquote, “founders of science fiction.”

The future is queer, right? Like, it's, it's such an obvious statement. And yet you have these huge, massively, imagined futures with all sorts of technological innovations. And yes, sometimes they're a critique of how no matter how far we innovate, we're still gonna have some of the same interpersonal problems, whether we're in space or on Earth or it's post-apocalyptic or whatever. They imagined something bigger and more beautiful, I think. If you imagine a future; how can it not be queer? So in that way, I think queer science fiction can be, yes, a critique, but it can also be filled with a lot more hope.

Sofia: Yeah, Yeah. It's not just about what's not here now, it's also about the world of possibilities.

Hannah: Yeah, absolutely, yeah. So yeah, I mean, I think characters without male/female gender were a big part of, you know, Ursula K. Le Guin's legacy and something that, you know, I remember reading them as a kid and just being like, “oh OK,” you know, you just you accept it, you move on. And it makes the world that you currently live in filled with so much more possibility. And Samuel Delaney, just, there's no stopping that person's imagination like it is incredible. It's not just not male, not female, it's not just our society turned on its head or upside down or backwards. It's truly a future vision of something completely unknown to us. I envy that brain every day.

Sofia: It feels limitless.

Hannah: Yes! Absolutely. It feels limitless. And also, it's a reminder that the limits are limits we give ourselves, and we don't need to do that *laughs*

Sofia: Yeah, yeah. If that's the if that's almost like the founding of queer themes in sci fi, where would you say that the genre is now, err, or how far has queer topics and science fiction come?

Hannah: We were just trying to think about this before we started, and it's interesting to me because in some cases we've come so incredibly far we have writers who claim their own queerness. We have people depicting worlds that are obviously queer, but that is not remotely quote-unquote "the point," right, where it simply is obvious part of the future that its relationships with aliens, it's found families on a broken down spaceship. It's, umm, you know, our boundaries are so much bigger or perhaps nonexistent. But then in other ways, I think we're in a moment of looking back at science fiction, especially from the seventies, eighties, written by people of color. And in those ways, it's going well, you know, is this queer? What, what is queer literature? If the author says 'this is a book featuring queer characters,' that's utterly wonderful. But also, where did we find ourselves before you could put that on a dust jacket? So it's really exciting to see that on a dust jacket now *laughs* which I would say is the, you know, capitalist part of where we are in publishing queer science fiction. But I think science fiction is just very queer. And so we're in a good place, but we still have a while to go, I think.

Sofia: Yeah. Where would you want it to go? What do you, what do you hope to see?

Hannah: You know, one of the things I've really enjoyed about some of the the leaders in queer science fiction right now is that it is hopeful. It can be jarring at times. It can be such a critique. But queer science fiction is in a position to ask extremely difficult questions, but answer them with hope that isn't based necessarily in like heteronormative futurity of like, 'And then a new person will be born and that's gonna fix everything!' But rather in looking around at the people that you are with and unusual circumstances in the moment and finding hope in that. And I think that that's really incredible. And that is what really excites me about queer science fiction right now is that it is not just submitting to being like, 'well, you're in a post-apocalypse, try to find food' *laughs* and instead imagines kind of the glory we can find in each other, whether that's in space, or on a future Earth, or someplace we haven't thought of yet.

Sofia: What kind of books are you reading right now that excite you? Or what is coming out soon that you want maybe your listeners to keep an eye out for?

Hannah: I mean, this is where I bring in our staff picks from our other booksellers. I'm reading, I just finished reading, Dr. Nnedi Okorafor's *Noor*, which is an incredible tale! They're most famous for their Akata Witch, and their Binti series. And once again, that's not something that where it's like stamped with a queer stamp, but it is a true future.

Africanjujuism or Africanfuturism is her genre not to be confused with Afrofuturism, it is not an American story. And that they're really, really incredible.

And again, it's just like, this is the world and isn't there, *Noor* is a near-future tale. So there's environmental injustice and what happens as we become increasingly cyborg-y as humans? And where is that line between humanity and machine? And that is an extremely queer question to be asking. So I really, really loved that. And just in that envisioning relationships that are not typical.

And then, we have, ultimate staff favorite, which we've done an event for and it's been passed around to everybody, which is *Light from Uncommon Stars* by Ryka Aoki. And that was one of those books that our programs director read at first, I believe. And she was like, 'Ah! the donuts and a Faustian Bargain and found family!' And I was like, 'What? You have to use more words.' *laughs*

It was just she was so excited and then I picked it up. And *Light from Uncommon Stars* is really a lot of what we're talking about in, OK, there's space, science fiction. Got it. OK, that's what people, you know, kind of first thing they think of when they think of science fiction is going into space, or being in space, or a community in space. But then it truly, truly is such a wonderfully queer story because it's playing with genre expectations that you have from the science fiction genre, and it's also playing with relationship expectations you have from, you know, a lifetime of reading these books. And I love when something that is maybe traditional in another genre, which is a Faustian Bargain, then getting brought into the future. And how does that play out and why are we still making these agreements and these bargains and being put in desperate situations in the future? And I can't give too much away, but the resolve is incredible.

Sofia: Yeah. No spoilers here.

Hannah: No spoilers.

And then *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* by Becky Chambers. Becky Chambers is really helping to completely upend science fiction in really, really wonderful ways. And their work is very snarky, it's very fun. But they, I think, are the best example, maybe of what hope looks like in science fiction right now. *A Psalm for the Wild-Built...* is well, there's a robot who comes to talk to a monk and it's a novella, and it's, it's in the smallness that the bigness exists. And again, it depends on our actions and us looking at ourselves, which everything in our world is designed to keep us from looking at ourselves, right?

Distraction, distraction, distraction, distraction and because this book is so quiet, it forces you to have some of the same conversations that are happening in this beautifully told story. It seems quiet, but I was completely shaken by it.

Erin: Wow, I'm really struck as I listen to your conversation with Hannah by the power of imagination. I actually just finished reading another extraordinary book by Becky Chambers, *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* and several characters in that book are navigating inter-species, inter-planetary relationships. They have much more complicated ideas about gender and sexuality and when you can imagine situations like that our differences on Earth can feel so trivial in comparison.

Sofia: You're so right, Erin. It all feels so small in comparison especially when you think of a whole world of possibilities just way beyond out there, why would we limit ourselves to the things we have right in front of us?

Erin: Yeah, and it makes me think of something that's true about fiction more broadly. I'm reminded of this study that I encountered a few years ago by novelist and psychologist Dr. Keith Oatley, who found that the more fiction people read the more empathetic they are, the better they're able to understand others. There's such a strong connection between imagination and empathy.

Music up then under

Sofia: QueerSpace is brought to you by the people behind AirSpace at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. It is produced by Katie Moyer, Jennifer Weingart, Nick Partridge, Amy Stamm and Sofia Soto Sugar. Mix by Tarek Fouda. Our theme music is by the team at Story Mechanics. QueerSpace is presented by Olay and distributed by PRX.

Erin: We would like to thank Hannah Oliver Depp, Malik Thompson, Christine Bollow and Amy Andrews at Loyalty Bookstores.

Sofia: Do you like personal stories about science? As told by the people who experienced them? Then you may like Erin's podcast, *The Story Collider!*

Erin: On *The Story Collider* podcast, we share true, personal stories about science, from scientists, journalists, comedians, and more. Some hilarious, some heartbreaking, and everything in between. Find it wherever you listen to QueerSpace

Sofia: Thank you for listening to QueerSpace! we'll have another episode for you in two weeks. And new episodes of AirSpace will be hitting the feed in April.

Did you know there's also a monthly AirSpace newsletter?! You can sign up through the link in the show notes. And follow us on Instagram and Twitter @airspacepod.

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