

Article

‘Speculative Slipstreaming’: The Impact of Literary Interventions within Contemporary Science Fiction

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson are two canonical writers participating in a ‘literary slipstream’ through their ventures into science fiction, creating crossover texts that confuse the boundaries between the literary and the popular. This interface is exemplified through the awards received by these writers, which help to bring literary credibility and integrity to the genre. Atwood’s first speculative novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), went on to win the Arthur C. Clarke Award and was nominated for a Nebula award and the Booker Prize, whilst her MaddAddam trilogy (2003–2015) was followed by the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Imagination in Service to Society in 2015. Winterson was awarded an OBE for her services to literature in the same year that she published *The Stone Gods* (2006), whilst her most recent novel *Frankisstein* (2019) was longlisted for the Booker Prize. This article explores the extent to which distinctions between the popular and the literary are reliant upon notions of inferiority and superiority, and the problematics of a desire to frame genre fiction according to perceived notions of literary value.

Keywords: science fiction; speculative fiction; literary prizes; contemporary women’s writing; genre fiction; literary and popular; Jeanette Winterson; Margaret Atwood

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Within a burgeoning landscape of literary awards, and notwithstanding assertions that the climate of prize culture has reached a level of ‘cultural frenzy’ (English 2005, p. 18), selected accolades continue to function as indicators of an elevated level of value: both an economic value in the sense of monetary reward and commercial consequences, and an artistic value in the sense of aesthetic quality and literary prestige. James English (2005) considers prizes to be the ‘single best instrument’ for negotiating the economic, social and political transactions of cultural capital, a process that he terms ‘capital *intraconversion*’ (p. 11). Claire Squires (2013) observes the exchanges that takes place through crucial interventions in a writer’s future career prospects and body of income, affirming that prizes occupy a position of centrality within authorship, publication and the marketplace as they proffer a form of combined ‘literary and financial currency’ (p. 299) that is traded when growing cultural capital within the literary domain. As well as a form of capital *intraconversion* taking place in terms of increasing the cultural capital of a specific author and their writing, prizes arguably hold the potential for conferring cultural capital upon certain types of literature. High-profile awards especially have the potential to impact upon the standing and visibility of nominated works, raising their perceived literary value. This includes works from within more popular genres, such as science fiction.

One such award is the Booker Prize, which is widely acknowledged as one of the most successful literary prizes (Dane 2020; English 2005; Squires 2013). Indeed, English (2005) notes that the Booker Prize has an ‘increasingly privileged cultural position’ (p. 209) and that even to be shortlisted is an achievement of greater value than winning another prize (p. 207), whilst Squires (2013) posits that high-profile prizes such as the Booker ‘function as shorthand for literary merit’ (p. 291). In 2009, Kim Stanley Robinson, a leading science fiction novelist and winner of numerous science fiction prizes including the

Nebula, Locus and Hugo awards, lamented the absence of major mainstream literary prizes awarded to works from the category of science fiction given that it is 'the literature that best expresses our time, that speaks to our time' (Robinson 2009). Robinson speculated that the scarcity of nominations from within the genre was due to the failure of judging panels of prizes such as the Booker to even consider works of science fiction, for the most part because of their lack of knowledge of or exposure to suitable examples: 'they judge in ignorance and give their awards to what usually turn out to be historical novels... three or four of the last 10 Booker prizes should have gone to science fiction novels the juries hadn't read' (Robinson 2009). However, a decade on from Robinson's observations and the year 2019 saw Jeanette Winterson's *Frankisstein* (Winterson 2019a) longlisted for the Booker Prize, whilst the winning novel of the same year was Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (Atwood 2019) (sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 1985), which was shortlisted for the same prize nearly thirty years earlier in 1986). This article will explore how the ventures into science fiction by these two distinguished literary writers help to bring literary credibility and integrity to the genre of science fiction. Additionally, these crossover texts confuse the boundaries between the literary and the popular and bring perceived notions of literary value into question; in attempting to clarify exactly what is meant by terms as loaded as 'literary' and 'popular', it becomes apparent that within the genre of science fiction the popular and the literary coincide and the borderlines between them are becoming more obscure. This interface is epitomised by both mainstream and genre-specific literary prizes and the key role they play as markers of literary merit and measures of literary value.

Judgements of literary value are reliant upon arbitrary differentiations between the popular and the literary, which in turn hinge upon hierarchical notions of inferiority and superiority. Ken Gelder (2004) postulates that popular fiction (and therefore science fiction) is 'best conceived as the opposite of Literature... it can often seem as if Literature and popular fiction exist in a constant state of mutual repulsion or repudiation' (p. 11). Gelder considers popular texts to operate at a more superficial level and demonstrate conformity to convention, whereas literary texts exhibit a uniqueness of style and a richness of depth: for example, at the core of genre fiction lies adherence to the structural narrative elements of 'pace, precision, plot, detail' with no 'superfluous internal thoughts', whereas more literary values are evidenced by 'humanity, soul, startling variations of style, texture and mood' (Gelder 2004, p. 97). Indeed, the act of referring to 'Literature' with a capital 'L' in and of itself connotes an air of superiority, reaffirming a hierarchical status in comparison to lower-case literature (i.e., more popular forms such as science fiction). Gelder's list of characteristics extends to encompass the writers themselves, with popular novelists being inextricably linked to the genre they write in whilst the names of literary authors stand independently on their own, transcending genre: 'A work of Literature is thus commonly regarded as self-contained, enclosed, and completed by the author's apparent uniqueness, rather than as a part of a shared and broad-based species of writing' (Gelder 2004, p. 40). When applied to the leading figures of contemporary science fiction, there appears to be some truth in this. Using two of the best-known science fiction prizes, the Hugos and the Nebulas, as a gauge of success, the multiple award-winners from the twenty-first century such as Ann Leckie, N.K. Jemison, Neil Gaiman, Michael Chabon, Connie Willis, Kim Stanley Robinson and Ursula Le Guin are all closely associated with science fiction and are not known for writing works that fall outside of the genre. On the other hand, authors such as Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson are not associated with this genre and are instead recognised as self-contained writerly entities with their own unique bodies of work. Although such binary distinctions between the popular and the literary have traditionally been utilised to uphold literary standards and demarcate literary worth, Gelder does recognise that sometimes 'these apparent opposite positions enfold together' (Gelder 2004, p. 98). When renowned figureheads of 'Literature with a capital L' undertake experimentation within genre fiction, the usefulness of such categories is brought into question.

Literary writers' ventures into science fiction have helped the genre to gain academic recognition whilst, in turn, the utilisation of popular genre fiction allows a wider readership to engage with academic ideologies (Makinen 2001). These writers are participating in what Veronica Hollinger (2006) defines as the 'literary slipstream': 'a text written by an author whose prose works are more often associated with the realist novel than with genre fiction. It is a telling demonstration of how non-genre writers turn to science fiction as a way to characterize the lived experience of technoculture' (p. 452). The term 'slipstream' was originally coined in the 1980s by Bruce Sterling, who used it to designate a particular subgenre of science fiction in response to the evolution of the genre beyond its traditional classifications. His usage of the expression is as 'a parody of "mainstream"', describing a genre that includes the fantastic, the surreal, the speculative—'a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange' (Sterling 2011, p. 7). However, throughout this article the phrase 'literary slipstream' will be understood in the context of Hollinger's reworking, specifically to signify mainstream writers who cross the boundaries into genre fiction. In this sense, 'slipstreaming' becomes a technique of writerly participation and literary experimentation.

Sarah Lefanu (1988) proposes that mainstream literary writers' participation in genre fiction helps to break down the existing hierarchies of such terms as 'literary' or 'popular' (p. 95), which brings the usefulness of such categories into question. For women writers principally, it is the anti-authoritarian style of the genre that holds an interest as science fiction's collaborations and conventions often break down traditional hierarchies between writers and readers (Lefanu 1988, p. 6)—take science fiction's many fan publications as an example, which often see readers as writers and writers as readers, in addition to the reader-led award process involved in many of its genre-specific prizes (to be discussed in further detail later on). Science fiction's position on the periphery of the mainstream means that it is open to borrowing from elsewhere and this marginalised position makes it a suitable genre for women to work in as it reflects their positioning on the periphery of mainstream (patriarchal) culture; Lefanu suggests that, since they have not had to bear the weight of the Great Tradition, women have been more free to experiment within the genre than their male counterparts (Lefanu 1988, p. 99). As a result, Lefanu concludes that science fiction offers a freedom to women writers that is not available in mainstream literature (Lefanu 1988, p. 2).

The time period in which the aforementioned comments by Lefanu are located, the decade of the 1980s, saw the increasing profile of women writers and critics in what had traditionally been a male-dominated territory. Alongside a shift in academia through the cementing of feminist science fiction scholarship (Merrick 2009, p. 14), various initiatives from publishing houses contributed to science fiction's changing relationship to the mainstream. A small number of women writers such as Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin had already been included in the initial series of the Ace Science Fiction Specials in the late 1960s, which were commissioned by writer and editor Terry Carr with the aim of presenting 'less popular, more artistically viable' texts that would move away from mass culture and towards a 'cultural legitimacy associated with mainstream success' (Brouillette 2002, pp. 199–200). Maintaining this trend for marrying the popular with the literary, The Women's Press, a mainstream feminist publisher, launched a dedicated science fiction series from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s that played a vital part in raising the visibility of women writers in the field. The collection worked to develop and establish a distinct branch of female-authored science fiction, testament to which are some seminal texts and authors including *The Female Man* (Russ 1985) by Joanna Russ, *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Perkins Gilman 1986), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Piercy 1987) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (Butler 1988). It is no coincidence that during this time period there were some concerns that science fiction was being 'taken over' by the mainstream as a result of corporate publishing and there was a perceived 'mainstreaming of science fiction culture' (Brouillette 2002, pp. 190–94). There was additionally a marked alteration within the conglomerate publishing industry whereby book sales and prestige

began to diverge, which provided a catalyst for deployment of literary genre fiction in seeking to combine symbolic and financial capital; this authorial strategy saw authors striving to be both 'prizewinners and best sellers' (Sinykin 2017, p. 478). If genre fiction is denoted by its 'bestseller' status whilst 'prizewinning' capacity signifies literary prestige, then the ability to combine the two is facilitated through writers' participation in the literary slipstream.

Two aforementioned women writers successfully participating in this literary slipstream are Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson, who are of canonical status within contemporary women's writing. Amongst many other awards and accolades, Atwood holds several lifetime-achievement awards and 26 honorary degrees, including those from the world-leading universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Harvard. She has twice won the Booker Prize, first in 2000 with *The Blind Assassin* (Atwood 2000) and again in 2019 with *The Testaments* (Atwood 2019), sequel to the previously Booker-shortlisted *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 1985): she has even had a commemorative postage stamp issued in her honour by the Canada Post. Winterson is similarly recognised in the UK as a contemporary writer of exceptional literary repute: an Oxford graduate, a Professor of New Writing at the University of Manchester and an Elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, she has been awarded an OBE for her services to literature in 2006 followed by a CBE in 2018. Lucie Armitt (2007) discusses Winterson's 'crucial role in the shaping of contemporary literary feminism', contending that her influence 'will certainly remain strong, for in the very power of her writing and her presence as an author of high renown she undoubtedly plays a key role in maintaining the wider collective reputation of contemporary women's writing' (p. 25). Such literary standing positions Atwood and Winterson as exemplary figures of Hollinger's 'literary slipstream', and their endeavours within the genre of science fiction provide insights into aspects that are integral to its consideration as a literary field.

The interface between the literary and the popular—more precisely, the genre of science fiction—is exemplified through the various awards received by these writers that are linked to their works of science fiction. These include genre-specific awards as well as high-profile mainstream literary prizes and tributes. Atwood's first science fiction novel was *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985. This work was nominated for the genre-specific awards of the Nebula, the Prometheus and the James Tiptree Jr Award, and went on to win the first ever Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987. In addition to these prizes, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 1985) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and Canada's Governor General's Award in 1986, as well as the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1987, demonstrating that the novel was equally recognised within the circles of mainstream awarding institutions. Following the completion of her *MaddAddam* trilogy, which comprised *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood 2003), *The Year of the Flood* (Atwood 2009) and *MaddAddam* (Atwood 2013), Atwood was presented with the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Imagination in Service to Society in 2015 as recognition of her established status within science fiction; it is also worth noting that *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood 2003) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Orange Prize (now known as the Women's Prize for Fiction). She was the winner of The Kitschies Red Tentacle award in 2016 for *The Heart Goes Last* (Atwood 2015), a genre-specific prize that will be discussed in more detail later on, and she has been nominated several times for the Locus awards, which are polled by readers of the science fiction and fantasy *Locus* magazine. Although Winterson's science fiction oeuvre is not as extensive, she was awarded an OBE for her services to literature in the same year that she published her first futuristic undertaking, *The Stone Gods* (Winterson 2007), whereas her most recent novel *Frankissstein* (Winterson 2019a) was longlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize alongside being recommended for the James Tiptree Jr Award (renamed the 'Otherwise Award' in the same year). These writers' participation in the literary slipstream is signalled towards through the crossover nature of the prizes they have been awarded following their ventures into the genre of science fiction. The overlap of prizes stemming from both mainstream literary institutions and genre-specific associations symbolises a blurring of the perceived boundaries between the literary and the popular.

Gelder posits that the prizes and awards within the realms of popular fiction have the role of ‘instantly and relentlessly’ canonizing genre-specific writers, particularly within science fiction where a plethora of awards and prizes is notable (Gelder 2004, p. 98). Consequently, in addition to their obvious mainstream literary status as signalled by their prize-winning histories, being nominated for and obtaining prizes from within the genre-specific field of science fiction reasonably places Atwood and Winterson as part of the ever-evolving canon of genre-specific writers. There are tangible links between science fiction’s prizes and its representative organisations, illustrated by some of the genre’s most eminent awards. For example, the Hugo awards, which are open to entries from around the world, are the oldest of the science fiction awards and are organised and awarded by the World Science Fiction Society (WSFS). The Nebula awards, another major science fiction prize enterprise, are open to works published within the USA and administered by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA). Within the UK, the Arthur C. Clarke Award is supported by the British Science Fiction Association and the Science Fiction Foundation, with the award being initially funded by Clarke himself. The subsequent interactions between the writers, reviewers, booksellers and readers during their contributions to these award procedures (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the award, a point that shall be developed when detailing the awards processes in the latter stages of this article) leads to a somewhat cyclical process as these various stakeholders simultaneously respond to and preside over the genre, which Gelder refers to as ‘something like a system, which constantly looks at itself and tries to do justice to what it sees’ (Gelder 2004, p. 100). Additionally, the eponymous style of many of these awards, honouring prominent figures within science fiction such as Arthur C. Clarke, Hugo Gernsback, Philip K. Dick, Ray Bradbury, John W. Campbell¹ and James Tiptree Jr, also means that ‘SF carries its mastery along with it as a kind of ever-present literary heritage’ (Gelder 2004, p. 98). Notably, there is a lack of female writers within this list, especially considering that the James Tiptree Jr Award (the penname of Alice Sheldon) was retitled as the ‘Otherwise Award’ in 2019 due to anti-disablist concerns raised over the conditions surrounding the deaths of Sheldon and her husband (Lothian 2019). However, despite this dearth of titular commemorations, the contributions of women writers to the continuing evolution of science fiction are becoming more and more recognised: pointedly, Dorris Lessing is currently the only science fiction genre writer to have ever won the Nobel Prize for literature. This recognition is evidenced from within the genre’s prize scene, as seven out of the last ten Nebula winners for the category of best novel have been women, including one transgender writer. The past six Hugo awards for best novel have also been given to women. The year 2018 saw the writer N.K. Jemisin making history by winning the Hugo award three years in a row, with a heightened number of female winners from within the other categories. The Arthur C. Clarke Award has also attempted to address inequities in the variation of nominees through publishing a separate longlist of female entries, following criticisms of an all-male shortlist in 2013 (Barnett 2014). The impact of these efforts to raise the profile of women writers can be seen through the considerable shift in prize winners of the Clarke Award: from the years 2000–2010 there was only one female winner, but from 2011–2021 onwards this number increased to seven.

With a profusion of literary awards, and well over sixty current science fiction awards listed in the Science Fiction Awards Database, English’s assertion that ‘prizes spawn other prizes’ (English 2005, p. 18) does seem to have some resonance within the genre. The Hugo awards were first presented in 1953 and have gradually expanded from a handful of prizes to now comprising up to seventeen different categories; in 2018, a separate Lodestar Award for YA fiction was conceived to run alongside these. The Nebula awards were founded in 1965 and saw the addition of the Damon Knight Grand Master Award in 1975 to recognise lifetime achievement, followed by the Andre Norton Award for YA fiction in 2005 and then the Ray Bradbury Award for outstanding dramatic presentation in 2009. English’s interrogation of the integrity and validity of prize culture is initially justified in the context of an ever-growing number of literary honours—‘With so

many prizes in play, how does one begin to add them up, to make an accounting of them?' (Gelder 2004, p. 22)—but he markedly undermines the value of awards that are solely devoted to genre fiction such as the aforementioned Nebula and Hugo, describing them as 'less legitimate' (p. 95). This gestures towards a hierarchy of perceived value between the literary and the popular, whereby genre fiction is often marginalised and positioned outside of the mainstream in an antithetical manner (Lefanu 1988, p. 99; Merrick 2009, p. 15). Peter Watts (2003) has aptly designated this as the 'hierarchy of contempt'.

From their vested positions within mainstream literature, both Atwood and Winterson have previously rejected the category of science fiction. In reference to *The Stone Gods* (2006), Winterson declares 'Well, it is fiction, and it has science in it, and it is set (mostly) in the future, but the labels are meaningless. I can't see the point in labelling a book like a pre-packed supermarket meal' (Winterson 2013). For Winterson, this rejection is prompted by an aversion towards the potentially restrictive nature of categorisation in general rather than a denial of science fiction as a genre, as she feels that 'Labels always strangle the scope of the work' (Andermahr 2009, p. 126). However, Atwood has famously outright refused to give her work the title of science fiction, preferring the term 'speculative fiction' instead (Atwood 2011). Helen Merrick (2009) observes that a tendency to substitute the term 'speculative fiction' for science fiction is an increasing trend amongst literary writers that reflects a disconnectedness between science fiction and its counterpart in the mainstream (p. 129); here it is relevant that Merrick's monograph, *The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms* (2009) is itself a science fiction prize-nominated text of related non-fiction, having been shortlisted for the James Tiptree Jr Award and the Hugo awards 'Related Book' category. Atwood has outlined her interpretation of science fiction as containing 'things that could not possibly happen,' whereas speculative fiction involves 'things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books' (Atwood 2011, p. 6). This propensity for realistic conjectures has led to her being described as a 'speculative realist' (Hoffman 2011, p. 35). For example, within the acknowledgement section of *MaddAddam* the following statement by Atwood precedes the events contained within the novel, explicitly positioning the book in the realms of speculative fiction: 'Although *MaddAddam* is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction, or are not possible in theory' (Atwood 2013, p. iii). Atwood's understanding of the differing responses elicited when dealing with events that might actually happen, which promote an active and conscious approach within the reader rather than the more passive pleasure of total escape that is afforded within science fiction, is reminiscent of a binary attitude towards genre fiction (as in Gelder's previously mentioned shallowness/depth) and what Merrick identifies as 'a persistent view of sf as mere technophile fantasy' (Merrick 2009, p. 25). Additionally, the refusal of the classification 'science fiction' reflects a more general inclination to dismiss popular genre fiction as trivial and lacking credibility (Bonner 1992, p. 95), whereas a favouring of the term 'speculative fiction' implies a literary integrity.

Frances Bonner (1992) notes the appeal of a more conceivable type of science fiction for the more so-called 'serious' writers because 'they relate more closely to the present; the extrapolations through which they derive seem more credible than the discoveries or happenstances that bring about the better worlds' (p. 100). This is perhaps why writers such as Atwood prefer to classify their work as speculative fiction, as a fiction that portrays a future that could conceivably happen and that is relevant to the present day, which can therefore be an effective vehicle for raising consciousness and promoting independent thought. Both Atwood's and Winterson's intentions are to use science fiction as a political tool; they create texts that are thought-provoking and unsettling, making intellectual demands on the reader to promote an active engagement with the concerns that are central to the texts. Winterson's motives in using the genre are, for all intents and purposes, political; although she values fiction as a work of art above all else, she feels that she has no choice but to write political books as it is the duty of writers 'to shape the world'—of her

futuristic fiction, her chief aims are 'to make the future accessible and show how near we are to that future' (Winterson 2019b). Atwood also believes in the transformative and ethical potential of imaginative literature in exploring the parameters of human experience, interrogating and reorganising social structures, and pushing the limits of the human imagination, to which a speculative form of fiction is ideally suited (Atwood 2011, pp. 62–3). It is arguable, then, that writers such as Atwood and Winterson have chosen to situate their work under the heading of speculative fiction rather than science fiction as they are trying to create some kind of division between works that are pleasurable because they can just be passively consumed and offer escapism, and works that are pleasurable through the active challenges they pose. However, the situating of science fiction in binary opposition to what is perceived as more 'serious' fiction demonstrates a rejection of genre for literary respectability, which in itself could be construed as an act of conservative conformity (Makinen 2001, p. 129). This paradox brings the usefulness of genre and definitions into question, and it becomes apparent that any attempts at clear-cut definitions are not infallible.

Such denials of science fiction as a credible literary genre are regretted by Ursula K. Le Guin; as a respected genre writer and award-winning Grand Master of science fiction she declares that, when literary writers such as Atwood and Winterson refuse genre classification in order to keep their literary credibility, it is disparaging towards those who have helped to shape the genre of science fiction (Le Guin 2007; Le Guin 2009). She acknowledges that these writers are acting to protect their literary credibility and has candidly commented on this when reviewing the works of both writers. In a commentary on *The Stone Gods*, Le Guin theorises that Winterson is 'trying to keep her credits as a "literary" writer even as she openly commits genre' (Le Guin 2007). Appraising *The Year of the Flood*, she argues that Atwood is acting to avoid being 'relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awards', placed in 'the literary ghetto' by 'literary bigots' (Le Guin 2009). Potential concerns regarding the trivialisation of science fiction are not entirely unfounded when considering derisive statements by mainstream critics, such as Birkerts' (2003) review of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* for *The New York Times*: 'I AM going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be 'Literature with a capital 'L''. Le Guin's sentiments were famously cited within Atwood's compilation of essays and short fiction *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (Atwood 2011, p. 5) and sparked an ensuing public debate between the two writers on their varying understandings of the definition of science fiction and the associated literary implications (Literary Arts Archive 2010). Atwood concedes that her definition of speculative fiction (things that 'could really happen') is actually what Le Guin categorises as science fiction, whereas her understanding of science fiction (things that 'could not possibly happen') would be classified by Le Guin as fantasy (Atwood 2011, p. 6); such varying and often contradictory claims regarding definitions of science fiction reveal the problematic and unsatisfactory nature of attempts to delineate arbitrary distinctions between genres. Atwood herself has admitted that her grasp of what science fiction means is slipping (Atwood 2011, p. 2), and that in terms of genre 'the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance. Bendiness of terminology, literary genre-swapping, and inter-genre visiting has been going on in the SF world—loosely defined—for some time' (p. 7).

A more helpful way to reconfigure and potentially reconcile such contentious understandings of genre is put forward within Hollinger's 'Genre Vs. Mode', which proposes a reading of science fiction 'not (only) as genre, but (also) as mode' (Hollinger 2014, p. 139). Taking Hollinger's concept of mode as 'a method, a way of getting something done' (Hollinger 2014, p. 14), science fiction becomes freed from the constraints of the rules and regulations that govern genre. Crucially, shifting from genre to mode enables 'the transformation of genre to mode of a literary form' (Hollinger 2014, p. 143); literary slipstreaming is an integral enactment of that transformation. Writers who participate in the literary slipstream may help to crystallise a reconfiguring of science fiction as a mode in their

shifting emphasis towards method and literary form. For example, Atwood has been positioned as one of the first literary writers to adopt the ‘post-apocalyptic mode’ (Bellamy 2021, p. 92) as she experiments with post-apocalyptic tropes and conventions in a literary form that moves beyond genre: ‘Oryx and Crake demonstrates that the post-apocalyptic can readily be used as a way of accomplishing particular narrative ends that exceed the limitations of genre’ (Bellamy 2021, p. 8).

Nonetheless, a preoccupation with ‘border policing, trying to fix SF as one clearly defined *thing*’ (Bould and Vint 2011, p. 3) and the continual attempts to define and delineate science fiction signal towards a sustained insistence on treating science fiction as a genre, and an accompanying resistance towards treating it as a mode. Given the generally unfavourable attitudes towards science fiction, the function of prizes in conferring cultural capital and their potential for altering perceptions of literary value is of immense significance. Tom Hunter, Director of the Arthur C. Clarke Awards, argues for the importance of science fiction prizes for elevating the culture surrounding the genre and discusses the role that these prizes play, not just in judging the best of the genre but in defining the specific criteria for the genre as well (Hunter 2012). This predilection for literary credibility is embodied by The Kitschies awards, founded in 2009, and a relatively new prize institute within the science fiction sector. The Award Director, Anne Perry, outlines the goal of the awards as being ‘not just to bridge the gap between genre and literature but to prove that there’s no gap at all’ (Hunter 2012). The Kitschies were initially marketed as celebrating works that would ‘elevate the tone of genre literature’ (Hunter 2012), a use of diction that explicitly reinforces the notions of superiority typically associated with demarcating the literary from the popular. Significantly, the official phrasing on the award’s website and its associated marketing has since changed to ‘the year’s most progressive, intelligent and entertaining fiction’ (The Kitschies 2022), which is perhaps a conciliation of any condescension contained within the previous phraseology and an attempt to avoid any connotations of a ‘hierarchy of contempt’. Nonetheless, The Kitschies awards and the Arthur C. Clarke Award are both aligned in their mission to promote a more intellectual strand of science fiction, a conception that is seemingly imbricated with a more highbrow strand of literature. Arising from the resulting literary crossover involved in both sets of awards, Hunter has encountered a somewhat surprising reverse snobbery evident from with the hardcore science fiction fan base, who tend to see nominations from the literary slipstream as ‘not so much elevating geek culture as attempting to abandon ship’ (Hunter 2012). This somewhat surprising perspective calls attention to the problematics of a desire to frame genre fiction according to perceived notions of literary value. As Squires states: ‘At the heart of any literary award are issues of literary value, taste and judgement, of representation and gatekeeping, and the uneasy equations of artistic and commercial value’ (Squires 2013, p. 300). If prizes are construed as being legitimate to a greater or lesser extent according to whereabouts the associated works are located along a popular-literary spectrum then, as highlighted by Hunter (2012), discernments of legitimacy may change depending on whether the stakeholders are positioned within or outside of the mainstream.

In seeking to secure and maintain rigorous levels of integrity and credibility, whether that be perceived literary credibility or displaying an integrity to genre, the restrictions involved in the procedures of prize categories and nominations are a necessary regulatory measure. Alexandra Dane (2020) discusses the exclusivity created by the eligibility criteria of the Booker Prize and how the prestige of the Booker is affirmed by the reactions of the publishing industry and the readers, which directly affects marketing strategies and, in turn, book sales; this cycle creates a perpetual identity for the Booker as the leading literary prize that is only sustainable due to the interests and beliefs of its stakeholders (p. 126–7). To illustrate this affirmation of prestige, prizes are used for the online marketing of Winterson’s *Frankissstein*, with the shortlisting for the 2020 Comedy Women in Print Prize and the longlisting for the 2019 Booker Prize and the 2020 Polari Prize being signposted. However, out of these three awards it is the logo of the Booker Prize longlist that is

prominent on the front cover of print copies of *Frankenstein*, which is evidence of the Booker's heightened value in comparison to other prizes. The 2019 Booker Prize-winning status also adorns the hardcover of Atwood's *The Testaments*. However, as Dane notes, this prestige and exclusivity actively contributes to 'perpetuating conservative understandings of quality and validity that permeate the literary field' (Dane 2020, p. 131). Additionally, the Booker Prize's hefty entry fees (£5000 for marketing costs and an extra £5000 for the winning title) and an increase in submission opportunities for previously-successful publishers and authors makes the 'old and rigid hierarchies of the literary field difficult to transform', indicating a 'conservative literary disposition' and a proclivity to maintain the status quo (Dane 2020, pp. 132–33). Therefore, attempting to establish a more 'credible' strand of science fiction through venerating participation from the literary slipstream may not actually be helpful; rather than rewarding the potentially subversive qualities of the genre, it may serve to reinforce convention and perpetuate an archetypal literary canon.

The proclivity to maintain a status quo is not confined to the traditional mainstream literary institution and has been the subject of controversy within science fiction prize culture, regardless of its subversive potential. This is in part facilitated by the regulations involved in the procedures of some of the awards. The Hugo Awards take place during Worldcon (the World Science Fiction Convention), with works being nominated by the members of the convention—essentially, science fiction fans. The process involves a nomination period followed by a voting period, whereby the six highest totals from the nominations go through to a final ballot. It is a similar procedure for the Nebula Awards, which are again nominated and voted for by members of its administering body, the SFWA, but a key difference is that the SFWA members are limited to professional writers of science fiction rather than a wider fanbase. The Arthur C. Clarke Award is one step further removed from the general public, being decided upon by a judging panel comprised of members from the award's supporting organisations (currently the British Science Fiction Association, the Science Fiction Foundation and the Sci-Fi London film festival). These nuances within the different awarding systems influences the way in which the various prizes are perceived; the Hugos are viewed as 'populist' and 'an antidote to SF's more worthy literary awards' as they are voted for by the members of the public and science fiction fans, whereas the Arthur C. Clarke Awards are considered to be more 'cerebral' (Barnett 2013). However, accounting for the historical constitution of the science fiction fanbase as typically being majority white, middle class and male, a voting system controlled by this same demographic has the potential to reinforce and replicate the existing power structures inherent within this faction of society. As a case in point, in 2013 a group of right-wing conservative lobbyists began campaigning against a perceived bias within the Hugo awards towards liberal and left-wing writers, and attempted to skew voting to ensure the nomination of more entries by white male writers (Dean 2015). In 2015, by encouraging campaign supporters to purchase membership to Worldcon in order to enable participation in the voting process, these groups were able to ensure a shortlist that was dominated by their own ballots; this did, however, lead to 'no award' being announced within five of the categories as a result of the response of Hugo voters, having the opposite of the campaign's intended effects and signalling towards the growing diversity within the ranks of recognised science fiction writers (Dean 2015; Walter 2015).

As Dane notes, there is a growing number of prizes with eligibility criteria designed to disrupt long-standing power structures, which 'illuminate the ways in which the tacit and explicit exclusivity of literary prizes influence field-wide perceptions and the production of literary tastes' (Dane 2020, p. 133). For example, the general literary mainstream includes awards honouring fiction written by women, such as the Women's Prize for Fiction (formerly known as the Orange Prize which began in 1996), and the celebration of LGBTQ literature through the Lambda Literary Awards since 1989. Within the genre-specific area of science fiction there is the longstanding Tiptree Award, renamed the Otherwise Award in 2019, that aims to encourage the 'exploration and expansion of gender'

(Otherwise Award 2022) and for which Atwood and Winterson have both been nominated. FIYAH literary magazine and the related FIYAHCON, which centre around the contributions of BIPOC writers in speculative fiction, now host the newly-created IG-NYTE Awards that aim to ‘celebrate vibrancy and diversity... and outstanding efforts towards inclusivity’ (FIYAHCON2021 2022). Considering the increasing success of women writers and writers from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds in the competitive arena of science fiction awards, these inclusive prizes of a more disruptive essence have had a substantial impact upon the standing and visibility of writers from these previously marginalised groups.

The impact of prizes upon the standing and visibility of science fiction is up for contention, as raising the perceived literary value of popular genres continues to prove problematic. There is some resistance to literary slipstreaming, both from within the science fiction community and from the wider literary sphere. Binary attitudes towards the popular versus the literary are somewhat engrained and difficult to adjust, as displayed by Victoria Brownworth’s critique of *The Stone Gods* for the Lambda Literary organisation: Winterson ‘is not at her literary best in *The Stone Gods*... Winterson should stick to the genre she knows best and captures so incisively—the landscape of interpersonal relationships—and leave the world of sci-fi to those who take it seriously’ (Brownworth 2009). Winterson has been nominated for the Lambda Literary awards several times and has previously won with her novel *Written on the Body* (Winterson 1992) in 1994 and her memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* (Winterson 2012) in 2013, in addition to being honoured with the Lambda Literary Trustee Award in 2017, but this same awarding institution did not appreciate her pioneering attempt at a science fiction novel. On the other hand, attempts to ‘elevate’ genre fiction are also contentious—efforts to do so have been rejected by some quarters of the science fiction community (Hunter 2012) and the very notion of elevating genre connotes a ‘hierarchy of contempt’, a phrase that Watts (2003) penned in reference to Atwood’s own categorisation of her slipstream endeavours. It is apparent that prizes do have the power to confer cultural capital, but context is important: some prizes seek to set, uphold and maintain traditional notions of literary credibility, whereas others seek to uphold integrity to genre rather than form. Although opinions may be divisive, literary interventions in the form of speculative slipstreaming expand the frontiers of both the popular and the literary, unsettling notions of literary value.

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Note

¹ Renamed the ‘Astounding Award’ as of 2020 due to discontent over John W. Campbell’s legacy regarding his racist and sexist views.

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