



Kenneth Rupp
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Fact Sheet

Title: The Future Fire

Co-Founder/General Editor: Djibril al-Ayad

Web address: <http://futurefire.net/index.html>

What they publish: They publish speculative fiction with a focus on socio-political elements.

They also favor feminist, queer, postcolonial, and ecological themes; writing by under-represented voices; and stories outside the Anglophone world. They also publish poetry and artwork.

Submission guidelines: Word limit preferably under 10,000 words. Use easy-to-read fonts like Times New Roman or Palatino. No simultaneous or multiple submissions accepted. Send stories through email as .doc, .docx, .rtf, or .odt files.

Description of publication: Website layout offers a simple, easy-to-navigate interface. All current and back issues published by the magazine are free to read. Although short stories are the main type of fiction within each issue, there is a diverse mix of flash, novelettes, and sometimes poetry. They also release purchasable anthologies available in both print and ebook that focus on underrepresented demographics, with themes ranging from disability to colonialism to women with unheard voices.

Prose per issue: ~5 prose stories per issue, ~20 fiction stories annually

Acceptance rate: 5%

Why I Chose The Future Fire

When I came across The Future Fire's website, the first thing that caught my eye (aside from the green Matrix-style columns of symbols in the background) was the line under the site name describing the social-political cyber-fiction they published. Being a fan of cyberpunk, I was eager to check out their selection. The first piece I read happened to be "Embedded," which was very much cyberpunk, but as I read more, I quickly learned that The Future Fire champions many more kinds of stories than that.

I settled with The Future Fire because it publishes dark stories written by an author base that doesn't often get heard in more mainstream speculative fiction journals. All of the site's back issues were available to read without charge, allowing me to easily delve into the wealth of perspectives and ideas.

Prose Reviews

Issue 2016.36

In “Embedded” by A.J. Fitzwater, black channellers are the contemporary hackers of their time who carry out hits on Ink, a supposed net-neutrality corporation that works to shape the internet into a restrictive, regulated experience. The main character, who goes by the nickname Click, gathers his two accomplices to carry out a strike against Brandon Gaytes, the son of a higher up at Ink, and attempts to manipulate him to gain access to the corporation. Gaytes ends up having a seizure at the same time that Click realizes one of his partners has set him up. Click meets his betrayer in real life to confirm the end of their friendship.

Although the clipped dialogue and descriptions mirrored the quick, nervous pace that black channellers like Click experience when on a strike, it sometimes made the plot hard to follow. Important pieces of information would pass in a sentence fragment, and that missing information would usually be helpful in understanding later concepts. The way the character relationships were shown, especially in how carefully Click had to evaluate his accomplices with gracefully paranoid interruptions, was wonderfully handled. Though I got a good image of the pod Click rested in, other settings were rarely described in sufficient detail.

“Vengeance Sewn with Fey Cord” by Christine Lucas follows a seamstress named Saysa tasked with sewing a wedding vest for the queen, who murdered Saysa’s family and burned her village to the ground years ago. As Saysa makes the vest, she also works on a chimeral suit of hides sewn together from different animals in accordance with a prophecy of revenge. On the night of the queen’s wedding, Saysa arrives in her mantle and murders the queen and her most powerful subjects.

Although the story is a revenge tale, the imminence of the main character's victory is wisely suppressed by the emotional, mental, and physical discomforts she endures. In fact, the story's opening scene did well in establishing how poorly Saysa is treated. The mood in this story was very strong. It was dark, built through brief descriptions of the plague-stricken land and the ill-treated civilians; important character relationships came through simultaneously in those descriptions. My biggest complaint is the ending when Saysa faces the townsfolk. It could have been shown a little more slowly to allow for more reaction time between the two sides.

Issue 2016.37

Vanessa Fogg's "The Wave" is a near-future sci-fi story where people can transmit a direct feed of their senses through an implant phenomenon known as mind-casting. Shannon, the main character, has a humble audience that enjoys experiencing her surfing feeds. When a storm in the Bering Sea creates the largest swell she's seen off the coast of Oregon, she goes out with her crew and rides the waves. She and her friend soon wipe out and nearly drown, but one of the crew zips in on a jet ski and saves them. Shannon recovers and rides one last wave. Back at home, her boyfriend, who had been watching the feed, doesn't understand why she surfs, but she isn't upset since she knows she doesn't understand his own passions.

I liked the author's approach to the science fiction element in this story. Rather than have the technology overshadow the characters or the plot, it worked in tandem with both, enhancing them through its subtle use while remaining integral to the story. The author's familiarity with surfing was convincing, especially in the line that mentioned how even the best wetsuit couldn't hold back the aching numbness, fatigue, pain, and fear that comes after hours of surfing. While the tension throughout the story built up and finally crashed like an ocean swell, my emotional

investment in the characters' safety was defeated soon after Shannon and Brent return to land. The urgency of Brent's condition seemed to be resolved too quickly when the medics applied the painkiller to his broken leg. There was little uncertainty as to whether or not he was in danger anymore.

The main character in Priya Sridhar's "Porphyria: Dazzle Con Debut," Rani, goes to a convention dressed as a superheroine named Porphyria so she can buy a book that her friend, Yasmin, wrote. While she's standing in line however, a racist convention-goer dressed as Captain America approaches Yasmin's booth to threaten her. Porphyria quickly subdues the man, lectures him, and escapes. Outside she meets her friend Wallace dressed as the Millipede, and he learns of her new secret identity.

At first I was taken aback by the comic book feel of this story, since compared to the other stories of the issue it was so light, but I came to enjoy the shift in storytelling. Its lighthearted vibe actually allowed it to explore racism without being heavy handed, using the protagonist's and the antagonist's identities as shorthand representations of their ethnic populations at large. Overall, the author did a great job of maintaining the pulpy voice throughout the piece, like when the Captain America villain pulled out not one or two, but three handguns total, and when the Millipede learned Porphyria's secret identity.

Issue 2016.38

In "The Grand Museum" by Ola Al-Fateh, Nonier, a budding artist, moves to his uncle's house in Egypt to gain inspiration for his craft, but the largest museums hold nothing exciting since he's already seen most of the items on TV. His uncle takes him to a local museum where Nonier discovers a series of busts on the top floor. One bust positioned over a doorway puts him

in a trance and pulls him into a dark room, where the spirit inside the bust takes control of his body and reveals to the reader that there are more spirits like it in the world.

This piece handles setting and description well, like when Uncle Wycliffe is shown to be “perched on a sofa with his arms folded across his heaving chest.” The uncle’s sarcastic personality was a good contrast to Nonier’s optimistic hopeful outlook. However, while these details were good, some were presented in a clunky manner. Also, I was offset by Nonier’s tragic fate at the end; it was executed creatively, but I don’t feel he deserved it.

“Siv Delfin” by Damien Krsteski is a near-future science fiction piece set in the City of Vasilegrad, where Claire, a ranking officer of the police force, attempts to eliminate the spread of the drug Siv Delfin, which amasses its users into a hostile hive-mind intelligence. As the users become aware that they are being observed, they blend themselves in more with the city’s populace and at one point ambush multiple members of the police force, including Claire. However, Claire escapes with her life and finds a vial of Siv Delfin on her attacker. While she’s at the graveyard where her family and colleagues are buried, she reflects on how she had wanted to take the drug immediately after finding it but reminds herself why she didn’t: that she owed it to her dead husband and daughter.

The pacing in this story is excellent, starting with the opening scene. The scene gives the reader a chance to invest themselves in the main character and care when Magda thwarts her first attempt to get information on Siv Delfin. The three paragraphs describing Siv Delfin that follow the scene then feel natural and deserved. Claire’s connection with her colleagues, particularly with Radan, was well constructed. What made it effective in part was how Radan’s recovery from his stabbing gave Claire a second wind right before her stressful meeting with the Bug-

eyed's leader. This way, Radan's and the other policemen's deaths made it clear how badly Claire had needed them as moral support.

Issue Comparisons

Issues	2016.36	2016.37	2016.38
Prose dealing with queer/feminine elements to none	2:2	1:4	1:4
Unpublished to established prose author	0:4	0:5	1:4
Prose POV (First: Second:Third:Multi)	2:0:1:1	2:0:3:0	1:0:1:2

An intriguing theme I noticed throughout issue 2016.38 was the lack of bodily control, whether that be through outright possession from another force as in Kuppert's "The Road under the Bay," or through a mind-altering substance as in Krstetski's "Siv Delfin." This theme was present in some form in each prose story of the issue, and it even reached into the other two issues, 2016.36 and 2016.37. The orchid pollen in Bennardo's "The Orchids of Lethe" separated identity from mind, indirectly affecting where the main character knew to go. In Linn's "Glow in the Dark," the main character realized that her literal brush with the toxins on the seal furs clouded her ability to think while she was talking with the tattooed man. Since art reflects a culture's outlook, this recurring theme could indicate an underlying concern of being unable to be oneself in society, that other forces are dictating how one should act or think in a given situation.

On a lighter note, the division of point of view among the issues is interesting, mainly because of how many stories experimented with multiple points of view. Of the three stories in this category, two of them divided the point of view between two or more characters, like the narrator in Feito's "Holy Many-Minds Home" and the construction workers' spirits in Kuppert's "The Road under the Bay." The true point of view from Al-Fateh's "The Grand Museum," however, was deceptively first person, since the spirit in the bust was simply narrating the main character's memories to the reader, but it was handled well enough that I counted it as multiple.

Interview with General Editor Djibril al-Ayad

Co-founder and general editor of The Future Fire, Djibril al-Ayad runs the magazine out of the UK, coordinating its activity with an international staff based in countries such as Ireland, America, Brazil, and more. When he isn't teaching workshops or grading papers, he reads and writes sci-fi. A few of his favorite authors include Ursula K. Le Guin, Melissa Scott, and China Miéville.

This interview was conducted by email on November 26, 2016.

Kenneth Rupp: When you first launched The Future Fire, what were some good surprises you found to running the magazine? What were some of the bad ones?

Djibril al-Ayad: Starting with the unpleasant surprises: it was a lot harder to get noticed by writers than we expected, so for the first year or so we received very very few submissions. We had to solicit stories from friends, and publish very slim issues, for a while. We were also disappointed not to see any stories that were experimental in medium (ecphrasis, hypertext, multimedia, not even comics), which in hindsight is something we shouldn't have been surprised by. You have to work hard (and be prepared to pay) for anything that unusual.

As for good things—the main happy surprise was how supportive the small press community as a whole was, both online and in meatspace¹. We made friends with editors and authors from several other publications (in particular the Whispers of Wickedness, sadly now closed) who were very helpful to us, introduced us to a lot of people, made going to cons less of a lonely business. Professional publishing may be a cutthroat business, but people in the small press are lovely!

¹ The physical world outside the internet

KR: You said in one interview that after The Future Fire returned from a hiatus, you were the only original staff member remaining. How does the direction and focus of the magazine pre-hiatus compare with the current vision?

DaA: We actually went on hiatus because I was the only person actively working on the magazine, and I'm too social to enjoy working in a vacuum or echo-chamber. When we came back we had managed to get a few more people on board, were preparing some guest edited, themed issues, and soon after started working on our first couple of anthologies. The main difference, apart from having new blood injecting energy into the work, was that we had a lot more diversity (still not nearly enough), which has had a positive impact on both the kind of work we attract and publish, and on our ability to read work for quality, content, sensitivity, representation and appropriation, for example.

KR: Can you run me through what a typical day working on The Future Fire is like? What keeps you devoted to the magazine?

DaA: I don't work on the magazine every day, by any means (except to acknowledge receipt of stories). On those days when I do, that mostly involves reading a handful of stories in an evening, or perhaps more over the weekend, and sending stories for reading by the other editors. Once a quarter when we're preparing an issue, I also spend quite a bit of time marking up stories in XML ready for publication, corresponding with authors and artists. Once a month I collate titles we've been offered for review to send to our reviews team, and then over the next few days going back and forth with publishers to request copies. I also spend a bit of time encouraging people to write guest blog posts for us, writing interview questions, and other promotional

things. I think if it weren't for all these social aspects of the work (discussing stories with smart and sensitive people) I wouldn't be able to keep doing it on top of everything else. (I have a pretty busy day-job.)

KR: Publishing roughly three to four issues a year is an impressive rate, yet I'm sure the stories we see in them are only a fraction of what comes in every month. How many submissions do you get regularly, and how did you build up to that?

DaA: We currently receive maybe a dozen stories a week (our acceptance rate has been steady at about 1/20 for a few years now). It has taken a while to hit these healthy numbers—although a few years ago it was even higher, things took a dive when one of our most prolific listings sites went behind a paywall—from the very dry first couple years. Listing on sites such as the Submission Grinder, Duotrope and Ralan helped a lot; we also had a boost in numbers when we upped our pay rate a little bit, and again each time we publish an anthology or a story by a "name" author, and our profile rises a little bit. The only way we'd ever get "pro" submission rates would be if we started paying significantly higher rates, which would take some doing (on which more below).

KR: In a world where Donald Trump can become president of a country, it seems that social dystopian sci-fi writes itself. How do you think the effects of his election might influence the tones and subjects of the stories you receive?

DaA: The only thing I can say is that whenever something terrible happens in the world, most of the people I hear talking say they want to see less dystopia, more comforting and safe fiction. So

maybe there's a move toward escapism—or rather, toward fiction that radically challenges the bigotry of the world by being actively inclusive, positive, hopeful...

KR: Why make all of The Future Fire's issues free? At one point, did you charge the reader for them?

DaA: We have never charged for issues of the magazine (although we sell print and e-copies of the anthologies, of course). We always wanted the work we put out to be free, both for practical reasons—finding a way to charge for online content is more of a pain than it's likely to be worth—and because I'm a believer in open access. With open content, we potentially have many times more readers able to stumble across the work, share it with friends or on social media, and the stories become a taster for authors' work as well, hopefully encouraging people to buy collections or novels they publish by traditional means. If we wanted to make money from TFF, we'd probably do so on a donation model (such as Patreon) rather than by locking up our content behind a paywall. And if we did make money, it would only be in order to allow us to pay authors and artists better; I've no interest in making profit from this!

KR: What advice would you give to a writer starting out in the genre industry, namely in science fiction?

DaA: Not being a pro publisher or author, I can only offer advice to people who write and publish primarily for the pleasure of doing so (if you make money from it, that's a bonus). The two main pieces of advice I would give would be (1) re writing: always push yourself—to be better, to learn more, to try genres or styles you hadn't tried. Read works like "writing the other" and learn about the lives of people unlike yourself (different genders, sexualities, races,

languages, social classes, religions, political affiliations, abilities or levels of health...) so that you can write them sensitively and convincingly. But be prepared to be criticized anyway, when you fuck up. Because you will. Accept criticism with grace, and learn from it.

(2) Re publishing: publishing short stories in magazine can be a great way to get started (if short stories are your thing; otherwise don't force it), and the best way to choose which venues to send them to are the magazines (anthologies, editors) that publish the stories you love to read.

KR: We're coming up on the twelfth year of The Future Fire. Are there any milestones planned for the magazine's anniversary or any big projects in general that need a shout out?

DaA: We actually published an anthology for our tenth anniversary last year (<http://press.futurefire.net/p/tff-x.html>), which was a mix of reprints of and sequels to, plus commissioned stories exemplifying some of the things we'd like to see more of (including ecphrasis, nonlinear narratives, experimental and multilingual work, and more poetry).

Our next big project will be an anthology co-edited by Nicolette Barischoff and Rivqa Rafael. Problem Daughters will amplify the voices of women who are sometimes excluded from mainstream feminism. We're looking for beautiful, thoughtful, unconventional speculative fiction and poetry around the theme of intersectional feminism, with a specific focus on the lives and experiences of women of colour, QUILTBAG women, disabled women, sex workers, and any intersection of these. We'll start with a fundraiser very shortly, and then open the call for submissions once we know that it's able to go ahead.