

Afrofuturism Quick and Dirty Primer for Readercon Panel Discussion

Here is Mark Dery's essay on Afrofuturism that defined the genre (though black science fiction was being created almost a hundred years before he coined the term. <http://www.fabrikzeitung.ch/black-to-the-future-afro-futurism-1-0/>

How much truth is there in this statement?

["Afrofuturism is about looking at and recovering those ancient ways and looking at how artists through the 60's and now are using those to talk about the future," says D. Denenge Akpem, scholar and performance artist.](#) Taken from [Afrofuturism: The World of Black sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture by Ytasha L. Womack.](#)

Panel Guests:

- Terrence Taylor / [@vamptestaments](#),
- Romie Stott/ <http://romiesays.tumblr.com>
- Phenderson D. Clark / [@pdjeliclark](#)
- Nisi Shawl/ [@NisiShawl](#)

New and Recent Afrofuturism Authors, Compliments of Milton Davis

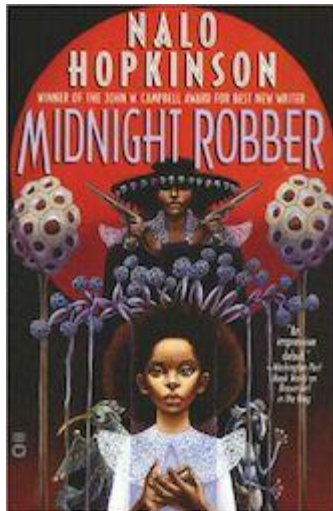
Author	Categories
1. Balogun Ojetade Fiction	Horror, Sword and Soul, Steamfunk, Science
2. Carole McDonnell	Chrisitan Science Fiction, Fantasy
3. Ronald Jones Soul	Military Science Fiction, Steamfunk, Sword and
4. Cereece Renee Murphy	Fantasy, Paranormal, Urban Fantasy
5. Valjeanne Jeffers and Soul	Science Fiction, Urban Fantasy, Steamfunk, Sword
6. K. Ceres Wright	Cyberpunk, Science Fiction

7. Nicole Kurtz	Cyberpunk, Weird Westerns
8. Gene Peterson	Science Fiction
9. Christine Taylor-Butler	YA/Middle-Grade Fantasy
10. Marcus Haynes	YA Fantasy, Urban Fantasy
11. Leticia Carelock	Paranormal, Urban Fantasy
12. Gerald Coleman	Sword and Soul, Epic Fantasy, Urban Fantasy
13. Jeff Carroll	Urban Fantasy, Science Fiction
14. Violette Meier	Paranormal, Urban Fantasy
15. Alan Jones	Science Fiction
16. L.M. Davis	Paranormal, Urban Fantasy
17. Netta Elliot	YA/Middle Grade Fantasy

Nisi Shawl reviews Nalo Hopkinson *Midnight Robber*

In February of 2016, *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination* published an essay I wrote called “A Crash Course in the History of Black Science Fiction.” Since then, Tor.com has published my in-depth essays on sixteen of the 42 works mentioned. In this seventeenth column I write about Nalo Hopkinson’s second novel, [Midnight Robber](#).

STOLEN SWEETNESS



Using variant speech patterns—the multiple patois of the many different Caribbean islands in her background—Hopkinson creates a honeyed symphony of words redolent of the newly settled world of Toussaint’s imported Island culture. Days after finishing the book, its phrases still ring in my mind: “Born bassourdie...What a way things does grow...Music too sweet!” As the prefacing poem by David Findlay declares, for colonized peoples, telling stories in any form of English is a way of appropriating one of our colonizers’ primary tools of oppression. Telling stories that deprivilege the status quo is a doubly subversive tactic, and that’s how *Midnight Robber*’s heroine, Tan-Tan, overcomes the awful odds against her.

BABY STEPS

Midnight Robber begins in Cockpit County, a sophisticated human settlement on the aforementioned extrasolar planet of Toussaint. Tan-Tan is seven. Her feuding parents tear her heart apart between them, and eventually she and her father Antonio must leave for Toussaint's transdimensional prison world, New Half-way Tree. There Antonio sexually molests Tan-Tan, driving her into the wilderness. With the guidance of indigenous sentients she thrives and lives a life of adventure punctuated by crusading raids to punish evildoers in the prison world's isolated villages. Masquerading as the Midnight Robber, a poetry-spouting figure familiar to all who attend the Caribbean's Mardi Gras-like carnivals, Tan-Tan inspires tall tales, by the age of seventeen turning herself into New Half-Way Tree's homegrown hero.

GIANT LEAPS

Hopkinson accomplishes so many wonders with this novel that it's worth taking time to enumerate them. First, in case you missed what I said earlier, I'll mention again the sheer beauty of Hopkinson's prose. Combining the dancing polyrhythms of a panoply of Caribbean vernaculars with thoughtfully interpolated standard English, her dialogue and her vivid descriptions of character, settings, and action move, groove, charm, and chime together in deepest harmony. The story is sometimes funny, sometimes tense, sometimes tragic, and always utterly involving. My favorite passage in *Midnight Robber* is when Tan-Tan, tired of the live food and alien housekeeping protocols of a douen village, snarks at her reluctant hosts: "Oonuh keeping well this fine hot day? The maggots growing good in the shit? Eh? It have plenty lizards climbing in your food? Good. I glad." Second, Hopkinson depicts the presence of African-descended founders of interstellar colonies as a given. Axiomatic. No need for discussion or speculation as to how that could occur. It simply does.

Third, she shows the denizens of New Half-Way Tree dealing with the native douen in ways that mirror the patronizing attitudes whites have historically held toward blacks, throwing the humans' ridiculousness into stark relief when they call one "boy," or refer to the species as a whole as "superstitious."

Fourth, appropriating a riff from male-centric buddy movies, Hopkinson pits Tan-Tan in a knock-down, drag-out fight against the douen woman who afterward becomes her friend. Like Eddie Murphy and Nick Nolte in *48 Hours* they pound each other into the ground—no hair pulling "hen fight" moves—then bond for life. (This is just one example of the author's gender-unbending strategies.)

Fifth, though Tan-Tan's home planet Toussaint is a techy wonderland, there's a revolution in the works. Runners and others who disagree with the colony's anti-labor attitude ("backbreak not for people") band together to find relief from their constant nano-electrical surveillance by the "Nansi web." They learn to disable the web's agents, communicate by writing on "dead" (non-digital) paper, and live communally in houses immune to web-enabled spies. One person's Utopia is another's nightmare.

Sixth, nonstandard sexuality is everywhere. Toussaint's proletarian runners practice polyamory. A pair of blacksmiths on New Half-Way Tree are kinky for [footplay](#) and [Dominant/submissive roles](#). The self-appointed sheriff of one prison-planet settlement has married a partner of the same gender. None of this is a cause for shame. None of it is criminal.

Seventh, the categories of difference described by Hopkinson are far from monolithic. Though it could be ([and has been](#)) called “Caribbean-colonized,” Toussaint is genetically and culturally diverse in the same way the Caribbean itself is, with its heritage deriving from indigenes, South Asians, European settlers, and enslaved and imported Africans of several nations. Likewise, on New Half-Way Tree, the social systems found in its settlements range from the corporatized peonage of Begorrat to the neighborly socialism of Sweet Pone.

GREATNESS OF SIGNS

All these wonders are encompassed in the widest wonder of all: the tale Hopkinson tells. *Midnight Robber* entertains SF readers while also modeling how speculative fiction can rescue them. Tan-Tan heals her wounded life with words, and words are what Hopkinson prescribes for us—especially those who’ve been marginalized—as we seek to save our ailing world from crisis after crisis. When Tan-Tan faces down her enemies, a mythological figure’s nonsense utterances entrance those who would harm her. Mystical roundaboutation makes of each incident an unfolding story rich in meanings its audience feels they *must* divine; verbal tricks elicit admiration and respect for the performer in Tan-Tan’s case—or, in the case her emulators, for the author.

“Corbeau say so, it must be so,” Tan-Tan sings to herself while preparing for freedom from the living curse known as Dry Bones. I like to paraphrase that song’s lyrics slightly, subbing in Hopkinson’s name: “Nalo say so, it must be so.” I like to remind myself and other authors that we have work to do. To put that reminder in Midnight Robberese: “Come, let us spake the fake that makes whole truth of nothingness, of notness, of mocking talking future walking out of sight and out of minding any unkind rules for fools. And let us be our own best blessing, never lessing, always yessing light.”