



Trends in Black Speculative Fiction

Eugen Bacon

Empowerment Through Storytelling

Where are the black people? I once asked myself at a speculative writers' event in Melbourne. I looked about and it struck me just how "white" Australia can look on matters of representation in publishing. And I wondered about speculative fiction – is it a "white" genre? Gratefully, this essay tells me otherwise.

Like any fiction, speculative fiction helps the reader to understand other perspectives, seeing the world through a character's eyes, their world, psychological, physical, or imagined. In its qualities of "non-realistic", speculative fiction comes with power inherent in the surreal or abstract: it offers a safe space in which to explore "realistic" themes – for example, racism, sexuality, social injustice, or whichever individual or societal dysfunction – that may be tougher for a writer or reader to tackle or relate to in their fuller constructs or reality.

In a form of subversive activism, speculative fiction empowers a different kind of writing with its unique worldbuilding that has, over decades, emboldened writers like Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison to write a different kind of story that's also about writing oneself in. Morrison was compelled to write something she could relate to, and Butler finally decided to "write herself in" because stories of her time did not feature an "other" like her.

The Rise of Black Speculative Fiction in Anthologies, Collections, and Short Stories

More than two decades after the publication of *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (Thomas), black speculative fiction continues to rise as a powerful conversation in genre fiction, and increasingly tackles precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial themes pertaining to

identity and culture, as well as feminist and queer themes pertaining to engaging with difference. Anthologies have become instrumental in the proliferating Afrofuturistic writing that heroes black people in stories from Africa and the diaspora, stories whose visibility is increasingly evident in award nominations and recommendations – for example 2021 Hugo nominee Ekpeki Donald Oghenechovwe, whose novella *Ife-Iyoku* won the 2020 Otherwise Award.

New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color (Shawl) – in its showcasing of interracial and cross-cultural stories – may have stunned its publisher, editor, contributors, and readers by winning the 2020 Locus, World Fantasy, British Fantasy, Ignyte, and Brave New Words Awards. Casting a diverse range of new and established writers, including (among others) Tobias S. Bucknell, Minsoo Kang, Kathleen Alcalá, Alberto Yáñez, and Chinelo Onwual, and featuring a foreword by LeVar Burton, *New Suns* explored intergalactic stories, dream stories, song stories, coming-home stories, futuristic stories, and even self-aware stories that encapsulate person-of-colour chants full of longing and conviction of belonging and place. With the success of *New Suns*, it's no wonder that Solaris announced its acquisition of *New Suns 2* for release in 2023 (“Solaris to Publish *New Suns 2*”).

In Titan’s *Black Panther: Tales of Wakanda*, edited by Jesse J. Holland, an exceptional anthology of the Marvel Universe, original short stories feature longing, heritage, and discovery – a reliving of Wakanda in tales that bridge Mother Africa and her diaspora. Making its heroes, or letting them forge themselves, the dominant miscellany, with its brand-new tales of a kingdom, her people, and her legacy, hosts the many faces of T’Challa, who personifies the regal dignity of black people. It interweaves technology, jungle, nobility, gods and duty, heroes, antiheroes, kindred, and honour, in a 512-page book that celebrates black comic books, writers, and artists. The miscellany rekindles all that the reader loves about Wakanda in its shape-shifting panthers, blue-black women with glowing eyes, and the Panther goddess Bast in human forms – the tales grappling with empathy, treachery, belonging, unbelonging, and recurring themes of personal and societal honour. In its stories, what stays with the reader about *Black Panther: Tales of Wakanda* is the nobility of blackness and a deep-seated longing for home reimagined in legends that chant in a language of affection.

Consider *Dominion: An Anthology of Speculative Fiction from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Knight & Donald), whose stories of gods, demons, magicians, dead children, refugees, taboos, apocalyptic worlds, and more, saw nominations, finalists and winners in the Hugo, British Science Fiction Association, British Fantasy, and Nommo Awards.... This anthology’s warm reception in the speculative-fiction industry and readership could be attributed to the calibre of its stories and authors, as well as the continued response to global events, including Black Lives Matter, that demand the necessity for radical stories of lost or forgotten peoples and cultures. The miscellany also highlights the urgency to decolonise language, while deconstructing and reconstructing the selves and identities of people of colour. Such was the accomplishment of *Dominion* as an anthology that Tor.com commissioned the editors, together with Sheree Renée Thomas, the new African American editor of the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, to edit *Africa Risen* (“Submit to *Africa Risen*”) – a celebration of African storytelling and speculative literature. In 2021, Donald edited yet another anthology, *The Year’s Best*

African Speculative Fiction (2021), featuring speculative fiction stories from Africa and the diaspora, published in 2020. It includes fiction by, among others, Tlotlo Tsamaase, Sheree Renée Thomas, Tobias S. Buckell, Chinelo Onwualu, Shingai Njeri Kagunda, ZZ Claybourne, and Suyi Davies Okungbowa. Stories are in the themes of the many faces of African gods, a futuristic Africa, African magic and cultural beliefs...everything African.

In *Nine Bar Blues*, Sheree Renée Thomas showcases in her single-author collection why she's an award-winning writer, poet, and editor in a mesmeric collection that is darkness, hum, and beauty. Opening with "Ancestries", a black mermaid tale that is a poem and a story pregnant with metaphor in the accord and discord of sisters, the collection imbues the reader with emotion and spirit, murmuring with gods and spectral spirits in a robust and richly layered multiverse that casts its gaze on black heroines with Afrocentric names like Yera, Fele, Ava, Nelse, Marva, Old Mama Yaya, and Aunt Dissy. The sky is a muddy river, and lightning bugs flirt with crazy dreams. Sleep is an ocean, and the mind drums with raindrops. The reader falls in love with stanzas of night, rain, wine, bridges, hunger, hearts, loss...silence. They encounter the depth of a woman's heartbreak as she seeks to hide from herself, as she quests to find something she has lost. Clouds of cicadas, carpets of husks, questions resting in darkness, old aunts with blue-black faces – their skins riven in cuts and runes.... Thomas takes the reader places, to voices full of rivers, to the language of trees, to where children laugh and leap within and without a sea of sapphires. Captivating words race together in character-hued dialogue that dances the story forward and offers a textual musicality from an ancient future that gives movement to worlds of sound like thunder breaking the sky.

Exploring Dark Short Fiction #3: A Primer to Nisi Shawl, edited by Eric J. Guignard, with commentary by Michael Arnzen and illustrated by Michelle Prebich, is a strong single-author collection that opens with an extraordinary story of a woman named Fulla Fulla and her visits to the marketplace of death. The primer introduces a highly imaginative mind proficient in conjuring, with Nisi Shawl's subversive text rich in girl empowerment and feminist ideology. Having co-authored *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* with Cynthia Ward, an inclusive text on diverse character representation in imaginative genres, Shawl breathes their preaching. *Exploring Dark Short Fiction* is mottled with diverse protagonists and secondary characters: Hispanics in a dystopian world. White folk in post-apocalyptic female driven narratives. Brown-skinned women in folktales set inside villages that host markets, baobab trees, and characters wearing cornrows and wiry tresses. Herein, the reader encounters marginalised identity stories, lesbian stories, hybrid stories, runaway and victim stories, even post-apocalyptic female-driven narratives that subvert expectations with textual charm and illuminating inquiry.

A new collection worth mentioning is Tobias S. Buckell's 2021 short-story collection *Shoggoths in Traffic and Other Stories*, featuring stories of hope, warning, or new futures for its black protagonists who are orphans, migrants, shamans, entities in the city grid....

Increasingly, short stories by people of colour are featuring in Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America qualifying markets ("Qualifying Markets") that pay (at least) 8 cents per word, including *Fantasy Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed Magazine*, and more. There are also more magazines and resources for black

writers, as published on the website of the African Speculative Fiction Society (“Publishers of Speculative Fiction”), which administers the Nommo Awards for Speculative Fiction by Africans.

Opportunities to contribute short stories to anthologies, such as the upcoming *Life Beyond Us* anthology by the European Astrobiology Institute – presenting strange new worlds beyond ours in stories accompanied by scientists’ essays – are finding more people of colour. Following the success of Wole Talabi’s novella “Incompleteness Theories” in his collection *Incomplete Solutions* by Luna Press Publishing, Talabi edited *African Futurism: An Anthology*, available as a free download (“Free Download of *Africanfuturism*”), and showcasing stories by Nnedi Okorafor, T.L Huchu, Dilman Dila, Rafeeat Aliyu, Tlotlo Tsamaase, Mame Bougouma Diene, Mazi Nwonwu, and Derek Lubangake.

Speculative Fiction in Novels and Series

As black writing in anthologies and collections carry their solid weight in proliferating a wealth of colour in speculative fiction literature today, novels and serialised novels are also contributing to the growing trend. The *New York Times* determined N. K. Jemisin as the most celebrated science fiction and fantasy writer of her generation, with the staggering success of her Dreamblood duology, and the Broken Earth and Inheritance trilogies, which have been recognised with Hugo, Locus, Nebula, World Fantasy, Tiptree, and even British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) awards.

Nisi Shawl’s *Everfair*, published by Tor Books, for example, is an alternate history Afrofuturistic novel in which African natives in the Congo develop steam power in an imaginary utopia. Tade Thompson’s science fiction novel *Rosewater*, part of the Wormwood trilogy, about a city in a near-future Nigeria, an alien invasion future noir, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Nommo Award, and was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award. It accompanied the success of the Molly Southbourne series, now a Netflix TV series (Alberge). Tochi Onyebuchi’s *Riot Baby* and its gaze at family, betrayal, and racism made a few award lists, including the 2021 Hugo, Nebula, Locus, and World Fantasy Awards, and won the 2020 New England Book Award for Fiction, the 2021 ALA Alex Award, and more.

Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift* won the 2020 Arthur C. Clarke Award and the *Los Angeles Times* Art Seidenbaum Award, was a finalist for a Ray Bradbury Award, and was longlisted for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. This massive tome, at 576 pages, enslaves the reader way beyond its finish. The novel is a fantasy so subtle, it’s extreme; a romance so fragile, it’s lush; a political arena so subversive, it’s sensational. This intelligent book sweeps across class, colour, and generations with its deception, reflection, fraud, prejudice, imbalance, balance, devotion, and hope. It’s a body of astonishments concealed in rebellious text that subverts the reader’s expectations with a comedic drama that’s integral to the story.

Namwali Serpell explores ideology, supremacy, disease, and curiosity in relationships forged and lost. She casts a spotlight on the place of women in society, on the intolerable choices of mothers and their children, on the quest for identity, on a search for belonging. Afrofuturistic in its gaze at colonisation,

independence, and a futuristic continent, the novel interrogates the challenges and intricacies of converging cultures. A vicious book, it hurls upon its gullible cast the cruelty of fate sprinkled with impish humour in a thoroughly researched and ambitious novel that's a fiction of fictions, a poignant grandiosity lavish in language and a magnificent intimacy with Africa – a continent of pent-up resentment finally bellowing her outrage.

Claiming his own playful approach, Zig Zag Clayborne offers *Afro Puffs Are the Antennae of the Universe*, the second book in The Brothers Jetstream saga. Uncensored, this frolicking all-black novel takes the mickey out of anything not black in a space-opera crusade that's science fiction of its own ilk, teleporting the reader – laughing – to new worlds where soul matters, as in black soul, rather than spiritual soul. In sharp contrast, but still grabbing hold of the power of blackness, is Suyi Davies Okungbowa's *Son of the Storm*. This first book in the Nameless Republic Trilogy is writing that celebrates blackness. The novel is rife with politics, superstition, magical realism, and Afrocentric cultures in an inverted colonialism where not only black but woman is power. It follows Okungbowa's award-winning novel *David Mogo Godhunter*, a story in which Lagos succumbs to ruin when the gods fall – a riveting debut of gods bringing chaos, in which Okungbowa brings a new Lagos to the reader.

It is clear from just these select exemplars that publishers, authors, and readers alike have a steeping interest in black people's stories. Thanks to the internet, audio books, and ebooks, the world is in the heart of an ongoing digital revolution that continues to stagger traditional publishing and make best sellers as well as anthologies and collections from smaller presses cheaper and accessible to ravenous readers. As e-publishers and self-publishers create opportunities for writers and readers alike, and more awards recognise calibre and uniqueness, rather than the author's or publisher's muscle, black speculative fiction will continue to rise in global distribution, and be increasingly accessible. A reader has only to look for it in anthologies, collections, even award nominations.

People of colour are increasingly leveraging the supremacy inherent in storytelling to craft revolutionary speculative fiction in stories of soul and claim: snatching their own power with fundamental philosophical questions and confronting themes that not only contemplate but *demand* different futures for black people. Writers from Africa and the diaspora are pushing the envelope, even splitting it, to chart new and perilous (depending on who's feeling threatened) fiction that tackles sombre topics. As writers like N. K. Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, Tannarive Due, Suyi Davies Okungbowa, and Tochi Onyebuchi increasingly become household names among speculative-fiction fans, along with the likes of Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Toni Morrison in their recognition in literary worlds, more writers of colour will join them.

And we haven't even got to black speculative poetry and the star-studded line-up of Akua Lezli Hope, Linda D. Addison and Brandon O'Brien – have you read his latest poetry collection *Can You Sign My Tentacle?* (O'Brien). It is almost certain that timeless black writing from Africa and the diaspora will continue to proliferate in the literary market, and readers will increasingly look for it, and find it.

Black writers are my community. I locate affinity with all their black speculative fiction stories that write me in. I can see myself in their protagonists, and their quests to find some truth, or to belong.

Biography: Eugen M. Bacon, MA, MSc, PhD, is African Australian, a computer scientist mentally re-engineered into creative writing. Her novella [*Ivory's Story*](#) was shortlisted in the 2020 British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) Awards. Her work has won, been shortlisted, longlisted or commended in national and international awards, including the Foreword Indies Awards, Bridport Prize, Copyright Agency Prize, Horror Writers Association Diversity Grant, Australian Shadows Awards, Ditmar Awards and Nommo Awards for Speculative Fiction by Africans. Bacon's creative work has appeared in literary and speculative fiction publications worldwide, including Award Winning Australian Writing, BSFA, Fantasy Magazine, Fantasy & Science Fiction, Bloomsbury and The Year's Best African Speculative Fiction. New releases: [*Danged Black Thing*](#) (collection), [*Saving Shadows*](#) (illustrated collection), [*Mage of Fools*](#) (novel). Website: eugenbacon.com / Twitter: @EugenBacon

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