

***Women of Horror and Speculative Fiction in Their Own Words: Conversations with Authors and Editors*, edited by Sébastien Doubinsky and Christina Kkona**

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Comprising two dozen interviews of authors and editors from across the horror and speculative genres, *Women of Horror and Speculative Fiction in Their Own Words: Conversations with Authors and Editors*, edited by Sébastien Doubinsky and Christina Kkona, seeks to reconcile the concepts of “genre” and “gender” as they relate to genre fiction. Conducted in the form of a standard questionnaire, which are adjusted slightly to fit the careers of each of the interviewees, *Conversations* collects and presents the responses in nearly their raw form. As the editors note in their introduction, the interviews are ‘edited as little as possible in order to reflect the personal take of each participant, [...and] to serve as sources for research on literary works and authors’ (p. 9). By structuring their book in this way, *Conversations* becomes at once a unique and insightful addition to the academic canon: a text that voices the experiences of women writers in genre fiction in their own words.

Because of the way that the book is organized, *Conversations* is a difficult book to review as one might any other academic text. Rather than asserting its thesis and meticulously presenting its evidentiary support, it instead uses the interviews as observations which, though pointed in the sense that they respond to direct questions, can at times move in unexpected directions, even counter to the anticipated assumption. Before going straight into the interviewees’ responses, the editors set the stage in their introduction, offering a brief history of genre fiction and the roots that bind it to women readers, even well before women were accepted

as its creators. This becomes the foundation of the book—a thread neatly wrapping each contribution—as the interviewees reflect on their own histories with genre and how being a woman in the field shaped their careers.

Though the editors mean the volume to be used as a source for research, offering readers a unified source from which to draw any number of perspectives for their own work, the book works equally well read from front to back; the similarly structured questionnaires help form a rhythm that makes it a quick read. It's at its strongest when reaching between interviews, as trends in the answers start to form. For instance, when asked directly whether or not they have experienced discrimination related to their gender, a surprising number of women think they have not—or at least, not overtly—or that discrimination based on race or class overshadowed gender in their careers. Based on these responses alone, one could come to different conclusions: either women writers in genre fiction have become more acceptable, and the “boy’s club” walls are beginning to crumble; or that the discrimination is so embedded in the industry that it’s difficult to spot when it happens, even for those being discriminated against. In either case, the current state of gendered bias in the field is only seeded here, opening the door for more rigorous and focused study to take root.

Many readers will also find a great deal of personal value in these chapters. Asked of their own influences and heroes, these writers and editors—many of whom readers will have undoubtedly read and reread themselves—give a treasure trove of diverse answers, highlighting countless other authors who broaden what it means to be a woman- or queer-forward fiction writer, whether historically or contemporarily. As a fan of horror fiction, it’s always a thrill to uncover gaps in your own reading web and a joy to fill them. It’s also telling when these same writers, when asked if the author’s gender mattered to them when choosing who or what to read,

say at most that it came secondary to stories that spoke to them or to their experience. These perspectives shift the onus of discrimination squarely on the shoulders of industry insiders and “the powers that be,” whose insistence that women-written horror is difficult to market, or unfit for a given anthology or collection, rings hollower than ever.

As valuable as these interviews are, and as unique as their presentation is, as a reader I found myself wishing there was a tighter conclusion tying them together. While the introduction does a great job of setting the stones of expectation in place, the end leaves readers without resolution; after the final interview, it just ends. Again, this fits the editors’ intention for the book, giving us a resource for further study—rather than a study, itself. Still, given the pointed construction of the questions and the direction of the introduction, the editors make their intent clear—but their efforts in remaining as unobtrusive as possible make the book feel unresolved. Even if the conclusion were, for lack of a better term, inconclusive, the editors are in a distinctive position to summarize their findings, which many readers would find important in its own right.

Despite this, the impressive cast of contributors and the wealth of knowledge and experience that *Women of Horror and Speculative Fiction in Their Own Words* collates into a single volume far outweighs any disappointment in its closure. To their credit, Sébastien Doubinsky and Christina Kkona lay out exactly what they intend with their collection—and they deliver. *Conversations* is a worthy addition to the shelves of readers and researchers alike, highlighting, at the very least, the reality of publishing genre fiction as a woman today, a topic that alone deserves recognition as we forge ahead toward balancing the scales of representation.