

Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology

Edited by Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller

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334 pages

Steampunk, Victorian-inspired science fiction/fantasy staged in literature, film, music, visual arts, and real life, can be dismissed as nostalgia, nostalgia in its most dangerous form as practitioners glorify a past that 1) didn't really exist, and 2) wasn't all that glorious for many as it did exist. However, this collection for the most part not only reshapes that idea but refutes it; the strongest essays move well beyond idealising the historical past from which steampunk derives. Embracing a past that recognisably did not exist but perhaps should have, identifying as much with the marginalised as with those in power in the Victorian era and beyond, many of these essays explore the power of steampunk to shape the future.

Steampunk traces its roots back to the Victorian fantastic fiction of authors including Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, whose work often featured the isolated, dangerous mad inventor-scientist-explorer and journeys to mechanically or scientifically advanced but morally or socially bankrupt other cultures and worlds. The conflicts within steampunk usually reflect those within ourselves, the monsters often being biologically human but characterised by monstrous desires. Because steampunk is alternative history, the monstrous is often a twisted extension of the forces that propelled the nineteenth century into our own present: imperialism, industrialization, and science, for example, are tools in the hands of a powerful few whose gains are ill-gotten at great cost to the many. Steampunk holds up a mirror to our past and our present and shows how monstrous the everyday can be. This collection reveals not only this side of steampunk, but also how the resistance within steampunk plots can transcend the boundaries of the imagined.

The book is divided into three parts based on steampunk buzzwords; the 'reimagining' and 'reconfiguring' (Part I), 'refurbishing' (Part II), and 'retrofitting' (Part III)--of people, spatial and temporal places, and things respectively--call attention to the subject matter's reworking of the past both as an aesthetic and to a specific purpose. Steampunk non-participatory observer and chronicler Jeff VanderMeer mirrors the opening ideas of editor/contributors' Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller's Introduction in his Afterword to the collection when he says that steampunk at its best is 'creating a space for progressive alt-histories,' not just a selective look at the nicer parts of a dark time in history with some cogs and goggles added.

VanderMeer's afterword also notes that steampunk fiction, as publishers latch on to the growth of the aesthetic, 'runs the gamut from crap to amazing,' producing in equal measures fluff and substance, and the same can be said of steampunk scholarship; one tendency can be to engage in the ultimately meaningless act of merely identifying something as 'steampunk' or steampunk-like. Although this can be a useful stage in illustrating rather than just defining a movement or moment like steampunk in the early twenty-first century, which contains multitudes, 'this unexpected thing is totally steampunk' lacks the real-world relevance and progressiveness that I would argue, especially after reading this collection, is itself a vital element of steampunk.

The five essays that comprise Part I look at the interactions that drive steampunk fiction. Beginning with Catherine Siemann's consideration of the social problems of the nineteenth century, those rooted in class and empire as well as gender, that steampunk fiction employs and reworks to draw explicit connections to our own age (a theme revisited throughout the collection), Part I moves on to consider several different aspects of gender interaction. In pieces

dedicated to female ‘troublemakers,’ notions of femininity, and sex and sexuality, Mike Perschon, Julie Anne Taddeo, and Dru Pagliassotti demonstrate that women in steampunk fiction can be stronger, power dynamics may be more complicated, and what it means to be human is less than absolute. The fact that these essays deal primarily with topics related to gender and sexuality may suggest that steampunk fiction is preoccupied with couplings, in interpersonal private-sphere relationships like so much nineteenth-century fiction, but these essays raise a possibility of a redefined balance of power, one that would shape a different future.

The final essay in Part I moves beyond fiction and signals the collection and steampunk’s move into to other media with Jamieson Ridenhour’s examination of ‘chap-hop’ artist Professor Elemental, whose work makes explicit unfortunate similarities between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries and parodies the tropes that steampunk in its simplest forms embraces. This arrangement is perhaps unfortunate for the two essays immediately following; neither Erika Behrisch Elce nor John Tibbetts moves much beyond identifying as steampunk a graphic novel and a movie that predate the development of steampunk as an aesthetic by decades. However, both source texts foreground science and megalomania and adhere to a visual aesthetic, and as these are pretty much necessary elements of steampunk, these essays contribute to the expanding definition of the term, a definition that is applied in the final text-based essay in Part II; collection editor Cynthia J. Miller looks at the boundaries that steampunk pushes as it reworks the errors of the past to reimagine the present and thus move into a better future.

The last two essays in Part II, the first coauthored by Suzanne Barber and Matt Hale and the second by Diana M. Pho, set up the contributions that make up Part III by examining the participants within the steampunk subculture from an observational and a participant standpoint respectively. As each examines a segment of the subculture at distinct points in time, the conclusions necessarily are limited, but again, show the possibilities of steampunk as it moves beyond merely an aesthetic to become a forum for critique and activism; the mad inventors and warmongers of the past become those of the present. Sally-Anne Huxtable and Amy Sue Bix open Part III with essays that consider the roles symbolic and pragmatic of the material objects that are as much a part of steampunk as the literary works with which the collection opens, and the final two contributions, from Bowdoin Van Riper and Jeanette Atkinson, look at the display of these objects-as-artefacts and their origins in print and in physical space.

At its best, steampunk does not imagine its problems away. By moving beyond steampunk as a mere curiosity, art for art’s sake, *Steaming into a Victorian Future* looks at the potential that steampunk has to be a contributor to social change through consideration of its past and its present. The collection is vast in its scope, critically evaluating ‘texts’ from an array of genres and the past, present, and future of this literary movement and its surrounding subculture, and is as valuable as an introduction to steampunk and its possibilities as any of the fiction collections available.

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