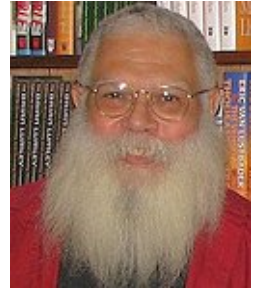




Delany, Samuel R. (b. 1942)

by Ruth M. Pettis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2005, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Samuel R. Delany.
Photograph by Kathryn Cramer.

Writer of science fiction, memoirs, erotica, cultural studies, and postmodern criticism, and winner of multiple Nebula, Hugo, and Lambda Literary Awards, Samuel Delany infuses his chosen genres with ideas drawn from linguistics, myth, and anthropology. A prolific writer with a restless intelligence, Delany is widely regarded as one of the finest science fiction writers of his generation

Born on April 1, 1942, Delany was reared in a black middle-class family in New York City. His father ran a funeral parlor; his mother worked in a public library. Surrounded with abundant models for intellectual encouragement, he was educated through what he describes as a daily "ballistic" journey from Harlem to schools for the gifted elsewhere in New York.

Delany graduated from the Bronx High School of Science in 1960. There he met poet Marilyn Hacker, whom he married at age 19, though he had been aware of his homosexuality since adolescence. In 1975, she won a National Book Award for Poetry. Delany often interweaves her poetry into his novels.

At the time of their marriage, both partners were exploring their sexual feelings. The pair established a bond based on their mutual appreciation of literature and music. They criticized each other's work, and pursued polyamorous affairs in New York's bohemian, literary, and gay subcultures in the early 1960s. The marriage lasted until 1980; the couple had one daughter.

Delany's picaresque memoir, *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988), the story of "a black man, a gay man, a writer," chronicles his years of school and marriage, which is presented as a time of intellectual discovery, punctuated by meetings with notables such as W.H. Auden. He intersperses these accounts of literary experimentation and growth with frank descriptions of casual sex in New York's homosexual cruising areas. Other autobiographical works include *Heavenly Breakfast* (1979), an account of communal life in the 1970s, and *1984* (2000), a collection of letters describing his life as a writer and his accommodation to the new realities of AIDS.

Delany's observations on the sexual currents emanating from the bars, baths, and other cruising grounds in the years preceding Stonewall are illuminating. Comparing the "hundreds" of men he had seen cruising at night with the following morning's newspaper reports on the few who had been arrested, he credits the power of gays' becoming aware of the sheer numbers of others like them as a necessary precursor to the gay rights movement.

Delany has achieved greatest fame as a science fiction writer. He published his first novel, *The Jewels of Apor* (1962), when he was only 20.

Though sometimes labeled a member of science fiction's "New Wave," he is more appropriately associated with Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* group (i.e., contributors to anthologies edited by Ellison in 1967 and 1972), along with Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin. Like their work, much of his subverts gender and racial expectations, and features strong female and non-white protagonists who challenge and reconstruct sexual

archetypes.

Delany's protagonists assume functions similar to aliens in traditional science fiction. Outsiders who question dominant paradigms, they are constructed with a psychological validity that transcends the expectations of genre fiction. They traverse an arc of double or triple consciousness impelled by their gender, sexual, economic, or racial non-conformity.

The short story "Aye, and Gomorrah" (1967), about sex trade with a neutered and alienated sub-group, probes the allure of ambiguous gender and the impossibility of lust to reconcile with its object. In "Time Considered as a Helix of Semiprecious Stones" (1968), a bisexual con artist operates in a city depersonalized by homogeneous media and authoritarian control. In this environment, the "Singers," itinerant performers who convey the news through unrecorded songs, offer the only vehicle for truth.

In *Babel-17* (1966) the heroine is scientist, action figure, and poet all rolled into one. Among her crew are navigators who can function only as members of a sexually intimate, three-person relationship. The novel explores how victims of oppression, trapped in the dominant language, become participants in their own subjugation.

The civilization in *Empire Star* (1966) is built by slave beings whose condition induces despair among their exploiters. Thus, the oppressor becomes the victim of the burdens she imposes on the other, and is corrupted and demeaned by the benefits derived thereby. One character proclaims what could well be Delany's manifesto: "The only important elements in any society are the artistic and the criminal, because they alone, by questioning the society's values, can force it to change."

In developing character, Delany employs a three-pronged approach. To be fully realized, he has written, characters must be shown engaging in purposeful, habitual, and gratuitous actions. He faults science fiction's depiction of women prior to *Dangerous Visions* for not according them all three modes of agency.

Delany's pornography (he cheerfully embraces the label) includes *Hogg* (1993), the narrative of an eleven-year-old boy drawn to a sexually violent man; *The Mad Man* (1995, revised 2002), a quest novel infamous for its scatology; and *Tides of Lust* (1973), a homoerotic metafiction that prefigures the sexual scenes in Delany's science fiction masterpiece, *Dhalgren* (1975).

Considered Delany's magnum opus, *Dhalgren* depicts a violent urban dystopia modeled on the abandoned, burned-out blocks that blighted American ghettos in the 1970s. Kidd, the protagonist, is both poet and outlaw, whose charisma wins him a street gang's loyalty and numerous "ambisexual" escapades. Kidd is also amnesiac; unable to learn from his past, he must continually reinvent his response to society. Meanwhile, Kidd as poet observes his own creative process as the novel unfolds. These devices reinforce a sense of disorientation and precarious identity, drawn from Delany's own experiences with dyslexia.

Less acclaimed but equally challenging, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) is a densely woven epic of a union between two men of disparate backgrounds, one a former slave, the other the scion of a powerful family. Privileged classes maintain their concept of status via holographic illusions, but even this sheltered universe seethes with a conservative backlash movement that is reminiscent of today's culture wars. As of 2005, however, its cliffhanger ending still awaits a long-promised sequel.

In *Triton* (1976), Delany adopts the perspective of an anti-hero who, as an unreconstructed masculinist, is frustrated by the social dynamics of a society wholly comfortable with sex changes and gay relationships.

The Nevèryon series (*Tales of Nevèryon*, 1979; *Nevèryona*, 1983; *Flight from Nevèryon*, 1985; and *The Bridge of Lost Desire*, 1987) is Delany's excursion into non-futuristic fantasy and includes some of his most popular fiction. Through the exploits of Gorgik, a gay, mixed-race former slave who rises to authority in a pre-monetary society, Delany explores the attributes of a "civilized" person: one who is accustomed to

social differences and has mastered effective modes of negotiation among them. *Flight* . . . includes the "The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals," which, Delany later explained, is intended partly as a refutation of those who would use AIDS "as an excuse to armor the body in silence, ignorance, and rubber."

In his essays, Delany comments on the relationship between his fiction and life as he experiences it. "Fiction makes models of reality," he observes. He is concerned with distinguishing between the "true" (culturally assumed paradigms) and the "real" (observable realities), because minority groups' reality models are different from those of the dominant culture.

Delany sees clear lines of influence from the African-American civil rights struggle to the women's and gay liberation movements, noting that the civil rights movement only made headway when society began questioning the sexual stereotypes that had been embedded in racial ones. For him, sexual orientation is not about identity--he considers that approach "reductive"--but rather about the struggle against socially imposed conformity. He notes that "coming out" underwent a shift in meaning after Stonewall, from "into gay society" (an action for a gay audience) to "out of the closet" (an action aimed at the dominant society), and fears that feminists and homosexuals may backslide into reactionary power dynamics if they fail to remain faithful to the civil rights model.

Delany's voluminous oeuvre of fiction is accompanied by a prolific body of commentary, interviews, and essays. He is fond of pointing out that science fiction is not so much a genre as a "way of reading" with its own connotations and expectations. He elaborates on semiotics (the semantic functioning of signs and symbols) as developed by Marshall McLuhan, Joseph Campbell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the poststructuralist literary analysis of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault. *Shorter Views* (2002) is of special interest for his views on sexuality, coming out, and AIDS. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) examines the effects of the Times Square makeover on New York City's working-class gay community.

Delany has taught creative writing and comparative literature at SUNY-Buffalo, Cornell, University of Wisconsin, University of Massachusetts, and the Clarion workshops. He is currently Professor of Comparative Literature at Temple University. In 2005, he received the Lambda Literary Foundation's Pioneer Award.

Bibliography

Blaschke, Jayme Lynn. "A Conversation with Samuel R. Delany." *SF Site* (April 2001): www.sfsite.com/06b/srd106.htm.

Delany, Samuel R. *Heavenly Breakfast: An Essay on the Winter of Love*. Flint, Mich.: Bamberger Books, 1997.

_____. *The Jewel-hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*. Elizabethtown, N. Y.: Dragon Press, 1977.

_____. *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

_____. *1984: Sex and Science Fiction and Semiotics in the City*. Rutherford, N. J.: Voyant Publishing, 2000.

_____. *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary*. Hanover, N. H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1999.

_____. *Silent Interviews on Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics*. Hanover, N. H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

_____. *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*. Pleasantville, N. Y.: Dragon Press, 1984.

_____. *Time Square Red, Times Square Blue*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

Dornemann, Rudi, and Eric Lorberer. "A Silent Interview with Samuel R. Delany." *Rain Taxi Review of Books* (Winter 2000/2001): www.raintaxi.com/online/2000winter/delany.shtml.

Ellison, Harlan, ed. *Dangerous Visions*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1967.

Garber, Eric, and Lyn Paleo, eds. *Uranian Worlds: A Guide to Alternative Sexuality in Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror*. 2nd ed. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990.

McCaffery, Larry. *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990.

Peplow, Michael, and Robert S. Bravard. *Samuel R. Delany: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography, 1962-1979*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980.

Schuster, Jay. "Samuel R. Delany Information." (September 19, 2001): www.pcc.com/~jay/delany/.

Weedman, Jane. *Samuel R. Delany*. Starmont Reader's Guide 10. Mercer Island, Wash.: Starmont House, 1982.

About the Author

Ruth M. Pettis is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.