How not to be human

WOMEN IN SCIENCE FICTION

Jim Endersby

GRESHAM
COLLEGE

Are women human?

Mary Robinson (1756/1758?–1800)

In 1799, the English actress and novelist Mary Robinson wrote *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*:

"Let me ask this plain and rational question—is not woman a human being"?

Of course not!

At least, not according to Aristotle.

Of course not!

Or the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797)

Enlightenment philosopher (Robinson dedicated her book to Wollstonecraft).

"In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist?

"The answer is as clear as that a half is less than the whole; in Reason.

Mary Wollstonecraft

"What acquirement exalts one being above another? Virtue; we spontaneously reply.

Mary Wollstonecraft

"For what purpose were the passions implanted? That man by struggling with them might attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes".

– *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

Mary Wollstonecraft

Young children were at the mercy of their 'passions'; needed firm parental guidance.

Education turned them into independent thinkers – but only if they were male.

Mary Wollstonecraft

Girls were only taught how to please. They are taught how to improve their lot in "the only way women can rise in the world,—by marriage".

© National Portrait Gallery

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Educational ideas expressed in his novel *Emile* (1762), which described the ideal education of Sophie, Emile's future spouse. The major distinction between men and women was that one "ought to be active and strong, the other passive and weak. One must necessarily will and be able, it suffices that the other put up little resistance".
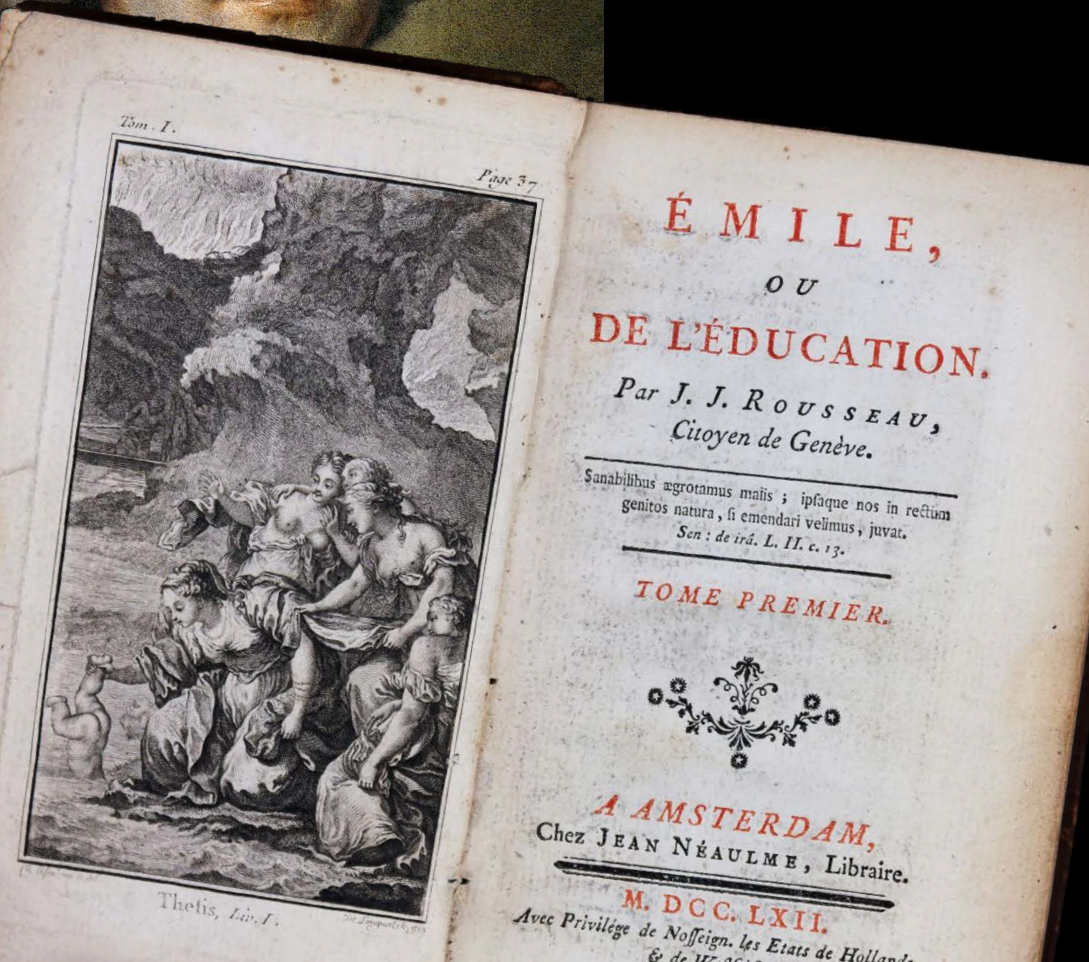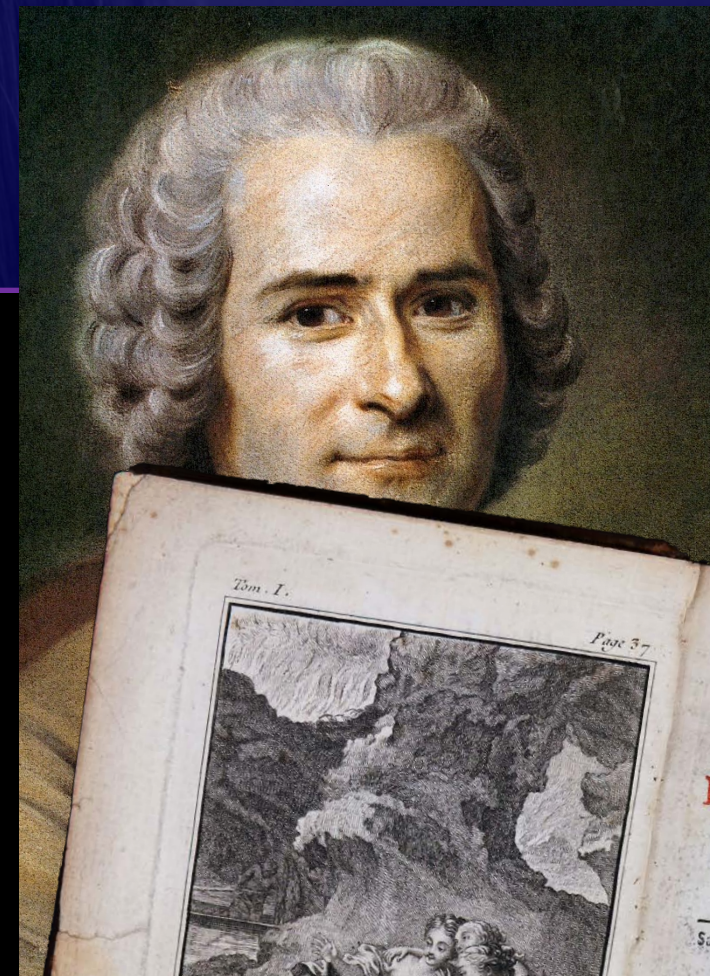
Mary Wollstonecraft

Rousseau himself insisted that it was "a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason".

And since that "was Rousseau's opinion respecting men: I extend it to women…"

Mary Wollstonecraft
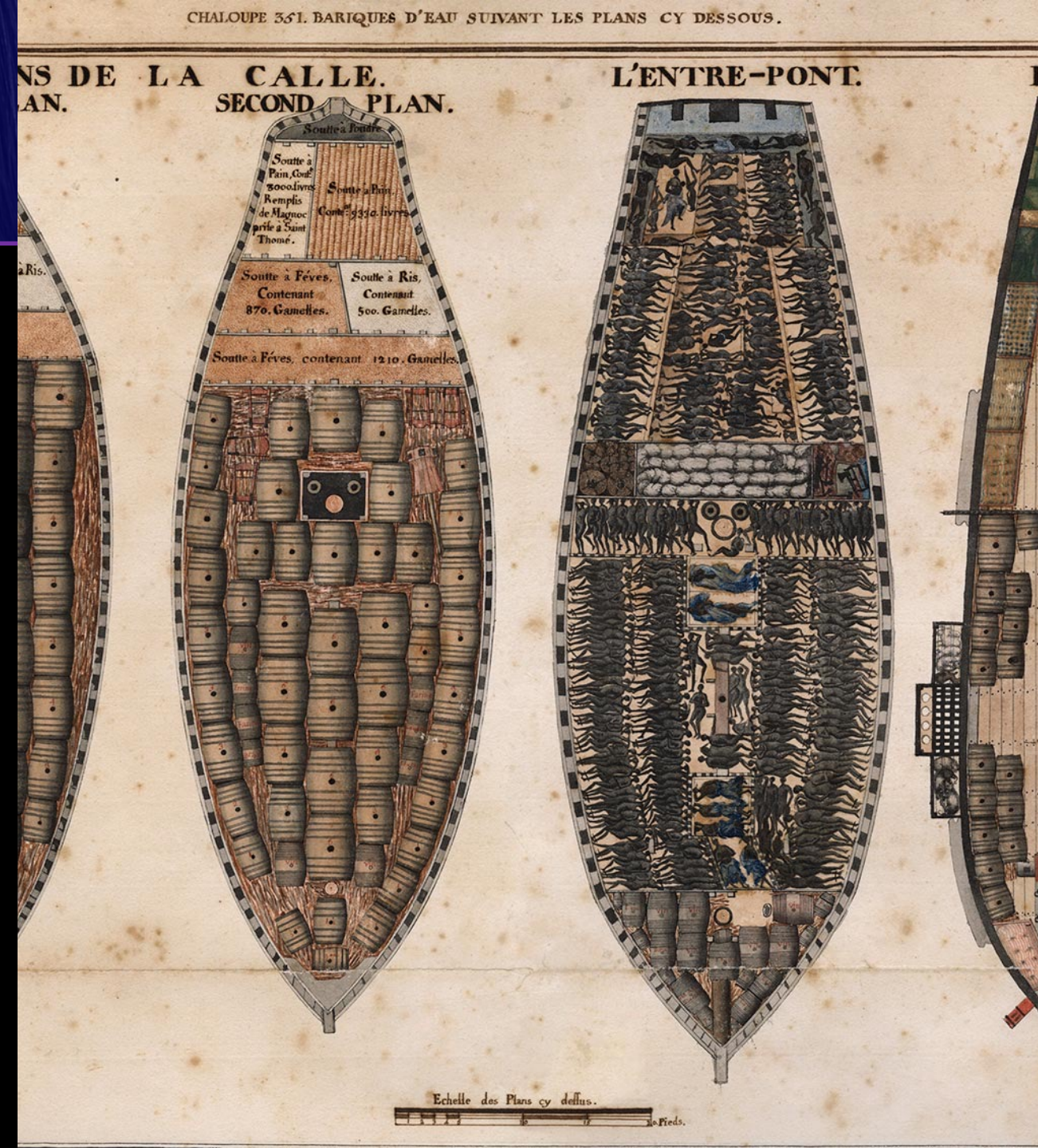
Society left women little better off than enslaved Africans, "subject to prejudices that brutalize them" in order "to sweeten the cup of man".

Mary Wollstonecraft

Vindication of the Rights of Men (1790) argued slavery was incompatible with the principles of Christianity, because Africans had also been created by God.

Haitian revolution

Slaves in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) rose up in 1791.

Haitian revolution

African-born revolutionary general, Jean-Baptiste Belley, leaning on a bust of Abbé Guillaume Thomas Raynal.

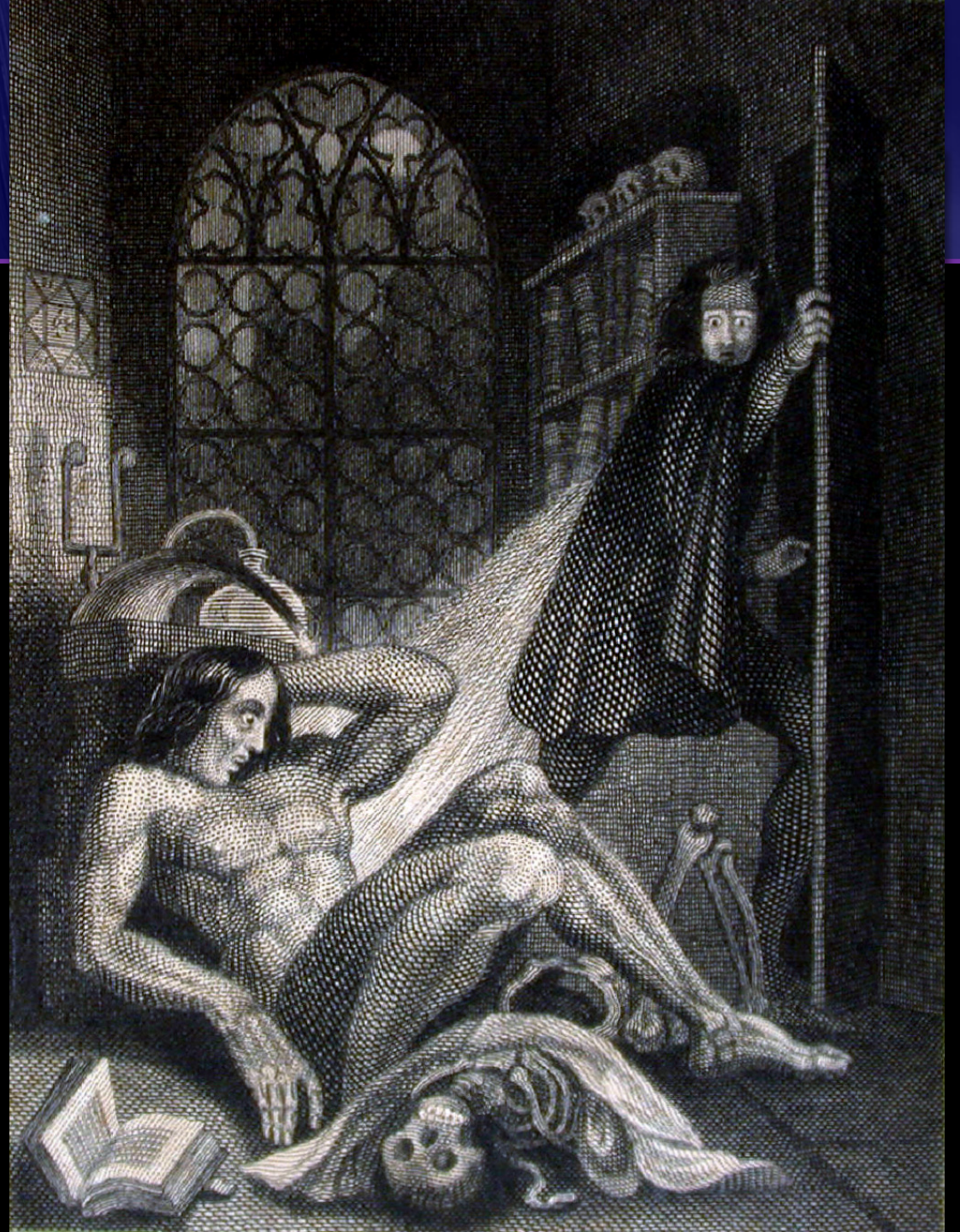One of three representatives from Saint-Domingue who arrived in Paris, February 1794.

Convention declared: "all men, without distinction of colour, will enjoy the rights of French citizens".

Mary Shelley

Wollstonecraft's daughter.

Frankenstein, or the modern Prometheus (1818) explored several of the themes in Wollstonecraft's work, notably the fundamental human rights to recognition, respect and parental care.
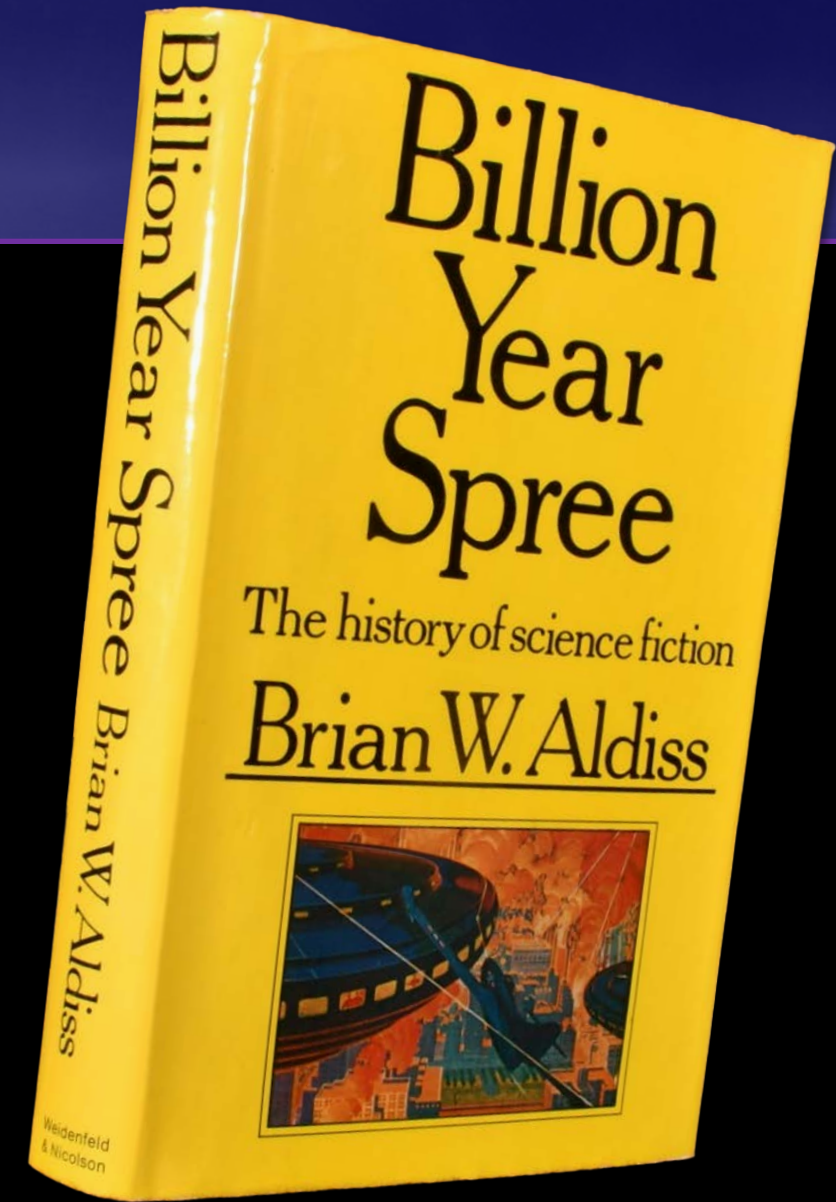
Frankenstein's legacy

Brian Aldiss argued that *Frankenstein* should be considered the first SF novel, not least because it helped define what SF was:

"Science fiction is the search for a definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced and confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mould".

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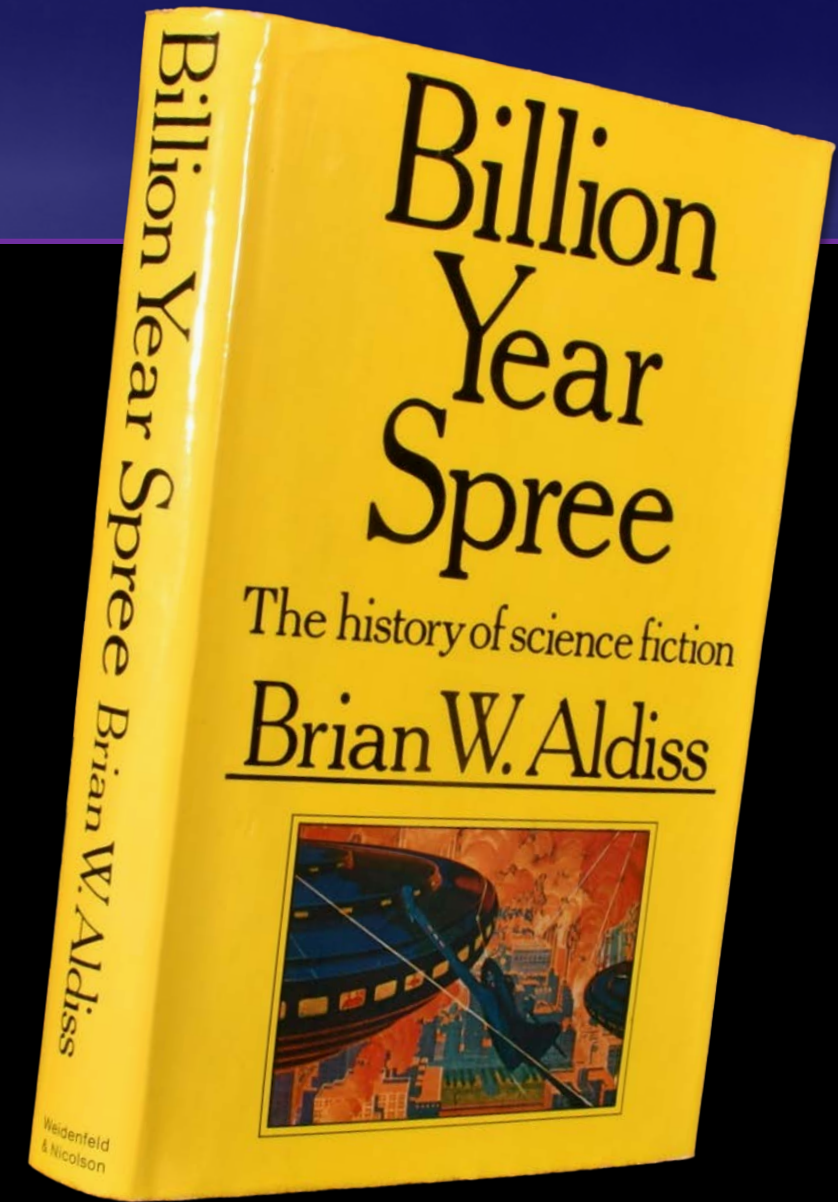
Billion Year Spree

The history of science fiction

Brian W. Aldiss

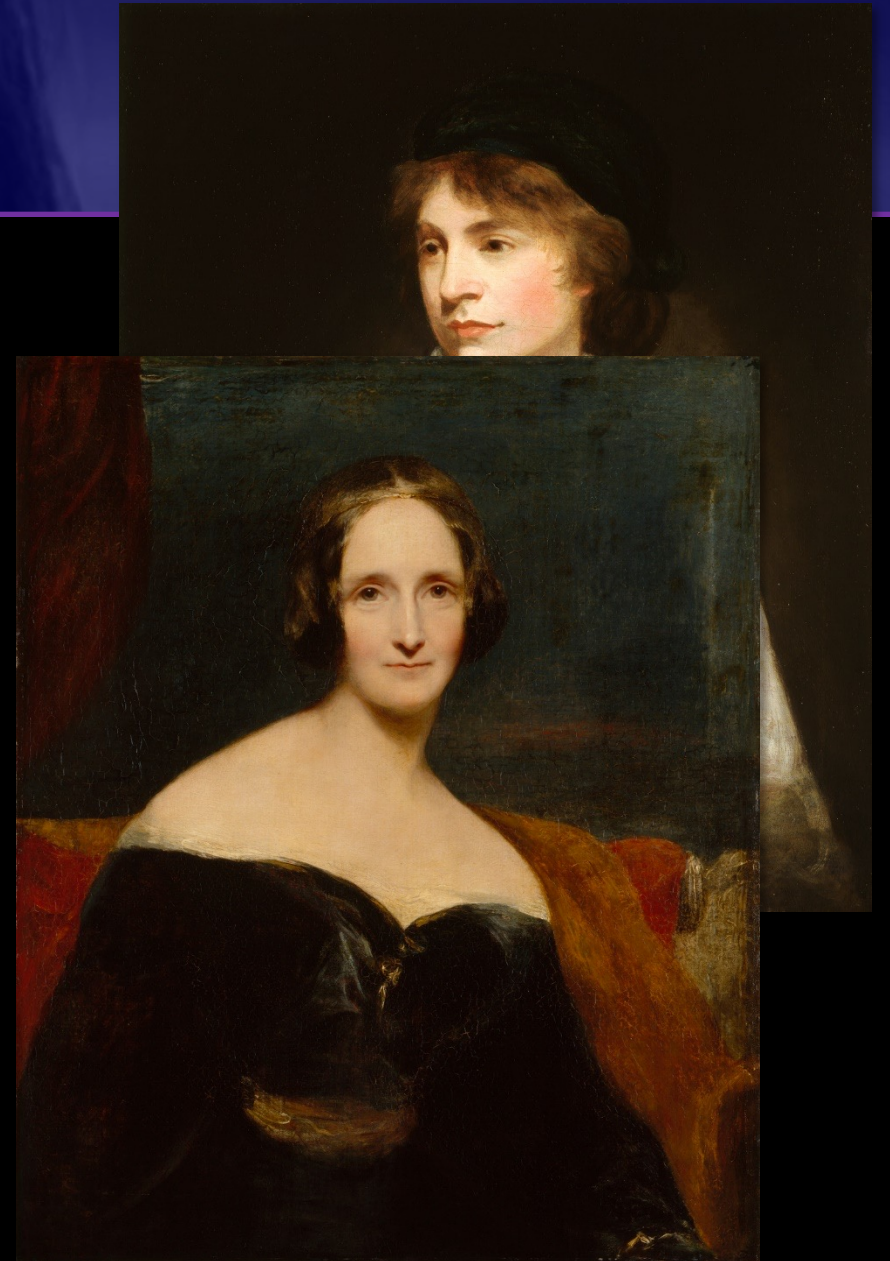## Science Fiction's "Conditions of Emergence"

Wollstonecraft asked 'what if…'? What if women were given equal education, equal opportunities and equal respect? What would the world be like?

Mary Shelley put the idea of creating an artificial life-form firmly into the public imagination. Opened up a whole new range of 'what if' questions.
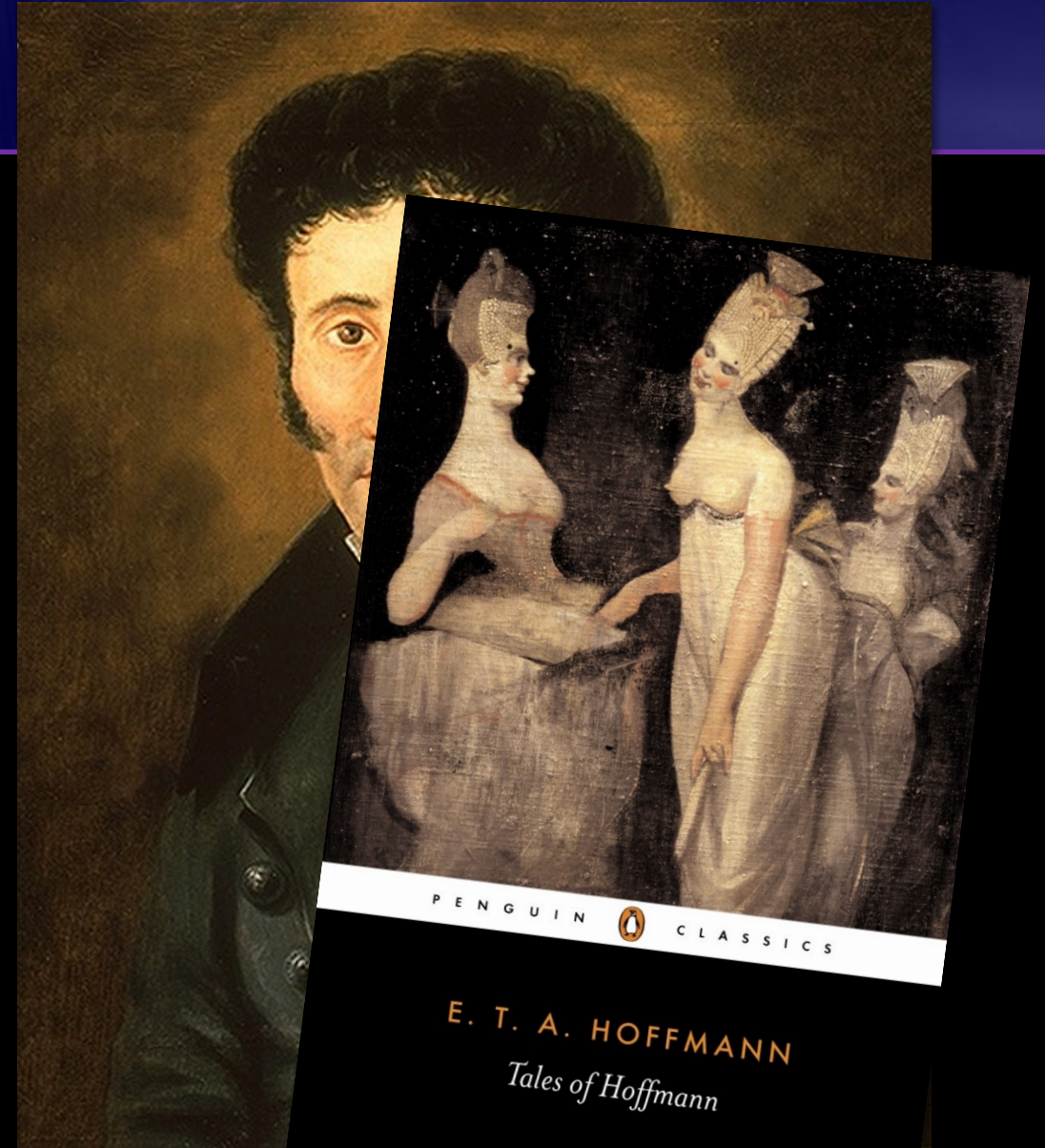
Living dolls

"The Sandman" (1816)

Written by E.T.A. [Ernst Theodor Amadeus] Hoffman.

Scientific fiction?

Hoffmann's main character, Nathaniel, is a student of science, whose fictional teacher Spalanzani was clearly based on based on the Italian natural philosopher Lazzaro Spallanzani (1729–1799).
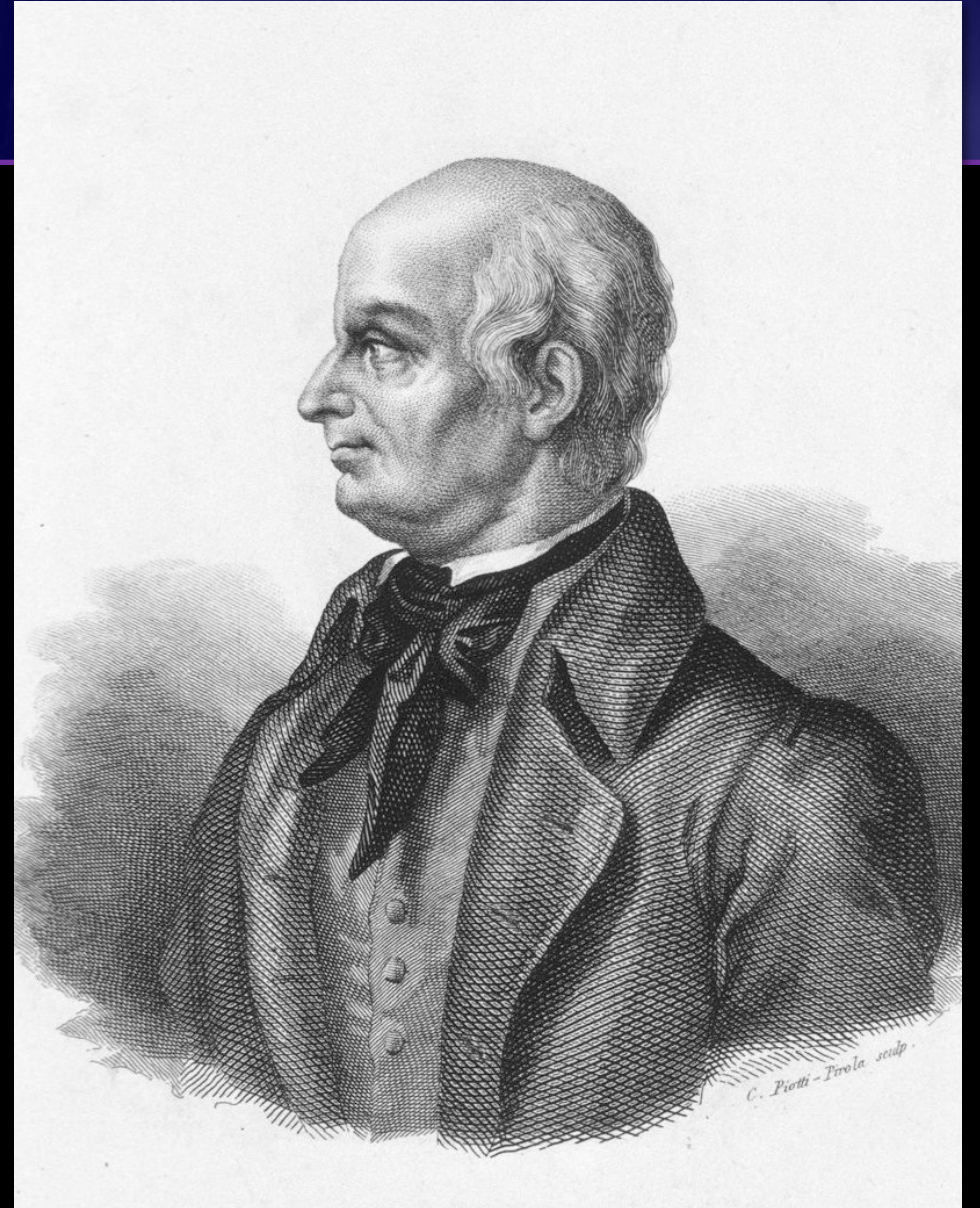
Scientific fiction?

Luigi Galvani dedicated his *Memoirs on animal electricity* (1797) to Spallanzani.

Even more dramatic experiments were done by Giovanni Aldini, who briefly re-animated corpses using electricity.

The Sandman

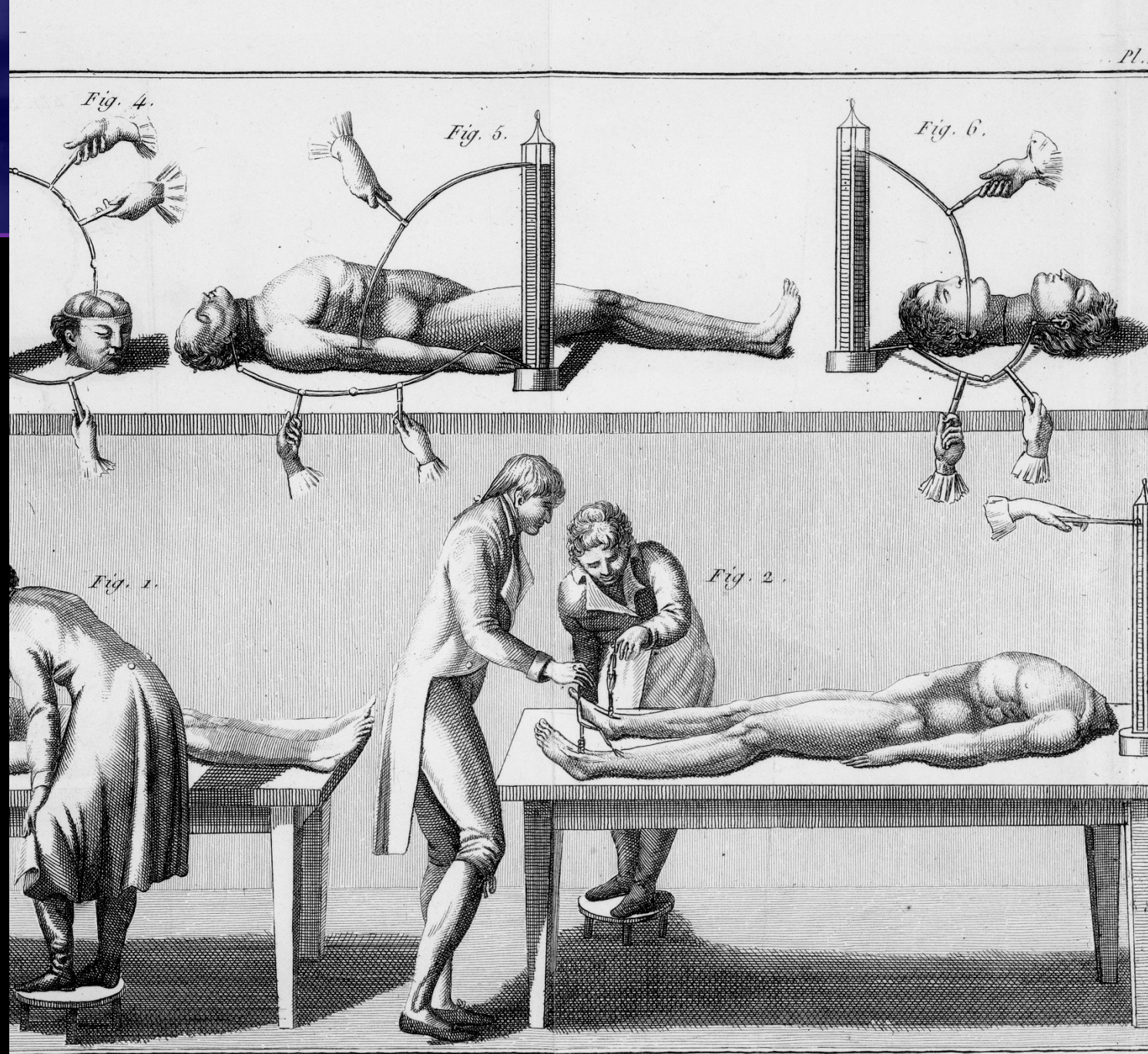Nathaniel falls in love with Spalanzani's daughter, Olympia, who is "tall, very slim, perfectly proportioned and gorgeously dressed".

Her dancing is perfect but has a disconcerting "exactitude of rhythm" and her conversation is distinctly limited (all she ever says is "ah, ah, ah").

PENGUIN CLASSICS

E. T. A. HOFFMANN
Tales of Hoffmann
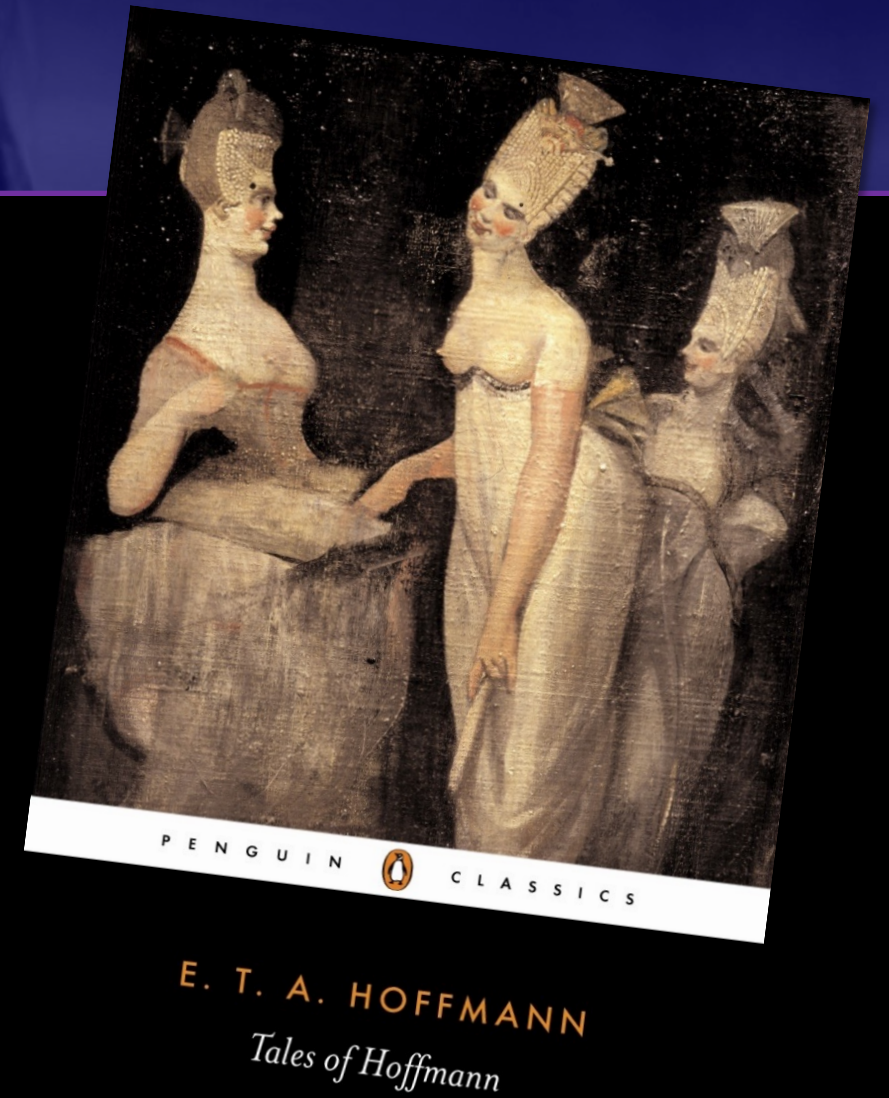
The Sandman

Nathaniel's friends wonder how he's fallen for a girl who seems like a "wax-faced doll", who moves as if "controlled by clockwork", and whose singing has the "unpleasant soulless regularity of a machine".

But Nathaniel loves her, not least because she "refrains from the dull chatter which amuses shallow natures".

Unlike his fiancé, Clara, Olympia listens to everything he says and never contradicts or interrupts him. While he talks, she never fidgets, stares out the window, plays with her lapdog, or yawns.

The Sandman

All going well, until Coppelius (the Sandman) returns, claiming he owns Olympia. He and Spalanzani fight over her, and when Nathaniel investigates the noise, he sees:

"all too clearly that Olympia's deathly-white face possessed no eyes; where the eyes should have been there were only pits of blackness—she was a lifeless doll!"

The Sandman

Spalanzani's colleagues are outraged by his deception, but some claimed they had not been fooled. Olympia never yawned, yet often sneezed (to hide the sound of the clockwork being wound). And so:

"there stealthily arose in fact a detectable mistrust of the human form. To be quite convinced they were not in love with a wooden doll, many enamoured young men demanded that their young ladies should sing and dance in a less than perfect manner, that while being read to they should knit, sew, play with their puppy and so on,…

The Sandman

"but above all that they should not merely listen but sometimes speak too, and in such a way that what they said gave evidence of some real thinking and feeling behind it. Many love-bonds grew more firmly tied under this regime; others on the contrary gently dissolved. …

"To counter any kind of suspicion, there was an unbelievable amount of yawning and no sneezing at all at the tea-circles".

L'Eve Future (Tomorrow's Eve, 1886)

Villiers de L'Isle-Adam (1838–89), an impoverished French aristocrat who supported himself by writing.

Describes a fictionalised version of US inventor Thomas Edison creating a perfect woman, for his friend Lord Ewald (who is in love with Alicia Clary).

Tomorrow's Eve

Edison has made an 'android' called Hadaly, which can modify to exactly resemble Alicia.

But, instead of Alicia's mind, the android has two phonographs of unparalleled fidelity and made from "virgin gold" (because it "yields a more feminine resonance"), upon which Edison has recorded the world's greatest thoughts and songs (and even paid various male "geniuses" for the rights to their unpublished thoughts).

Tomorrow's Eve

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

Translated by Robert Martin Adams
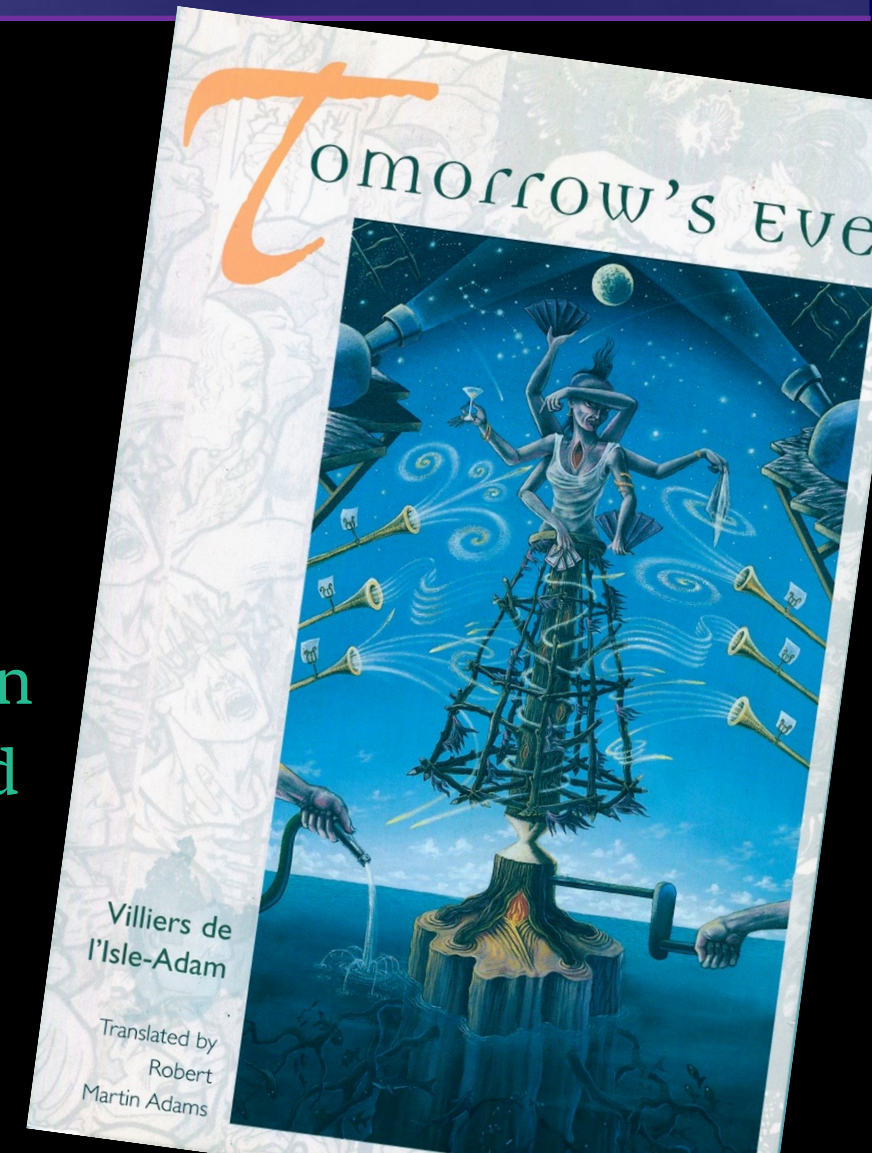
Tomorrow's Eve

Edison claims he will replace "*an* intelligence with Intelligence itself".

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

Translated by Robert Martin Adams
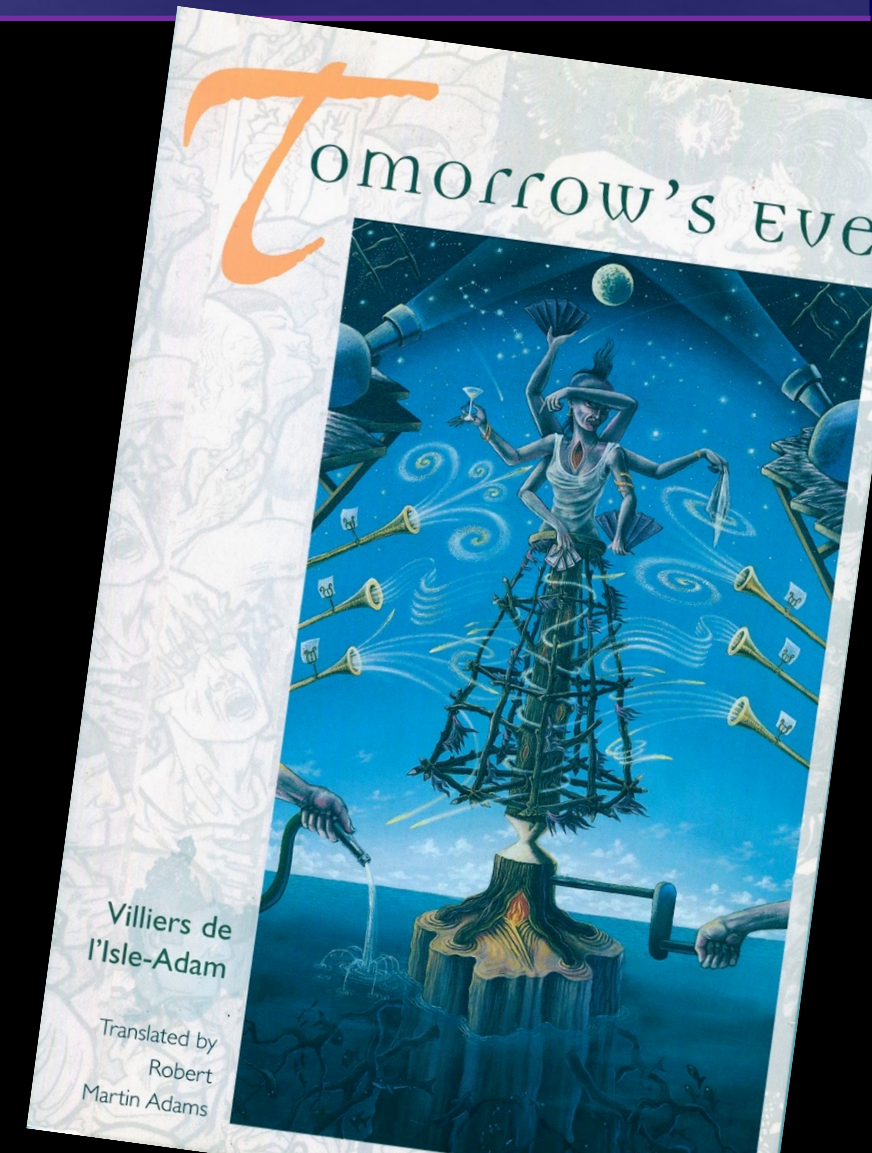
The real Edison

The "Wizard of Menlo Park" registered over 1,000 patents in his lifetime. He expected his staff to come up with a minor patent every 10 days, and a major one every year.

The real Edison

Daniel H. Craig (one of Edison's financial backers), wrote to say:

"If you should tell me you could make *babies* by machinery, I shouldn't doubt it".

"Edison's Phonographic Doll"

Scientific American (1890).

"Edison's Phonographic Doll"

Efficient production lines churned out 500 dolls a day, but no machine could duplicate the recorded cylinders.
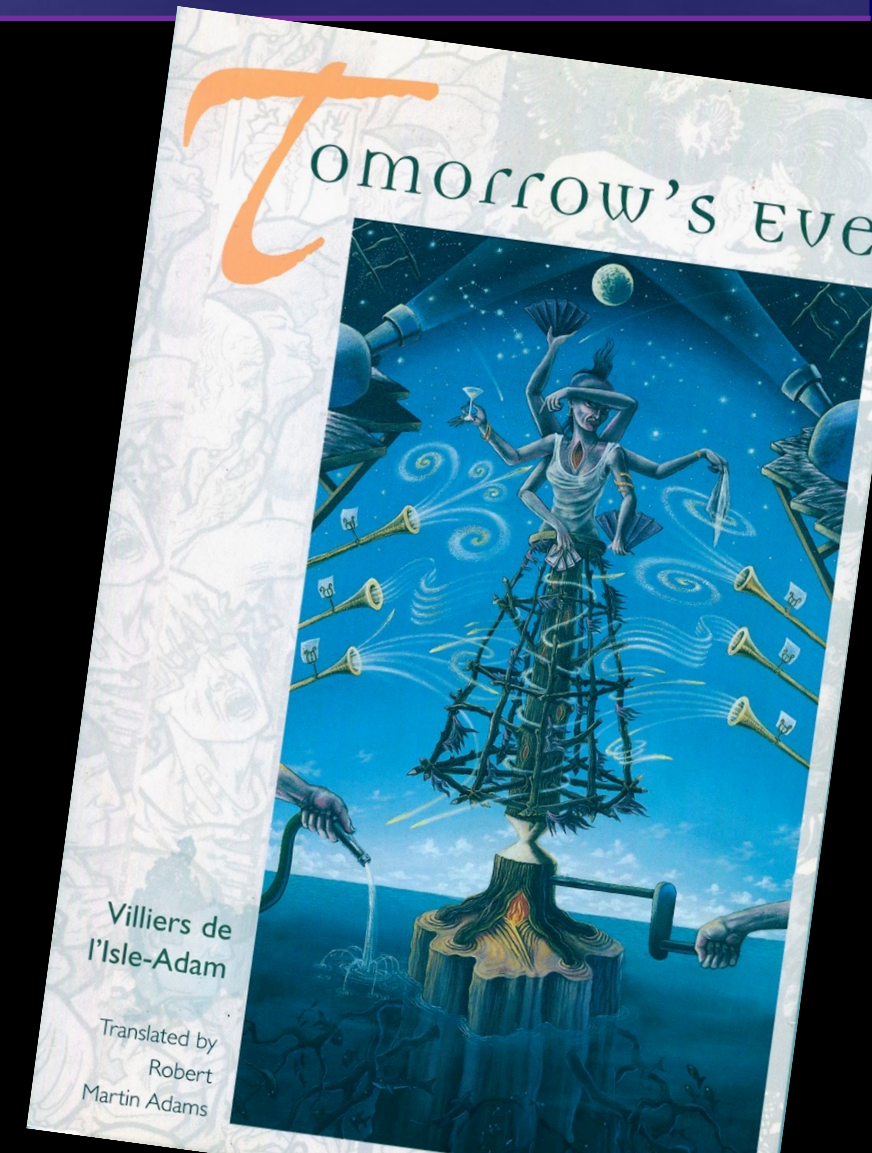
So each doll's cylinder had to be recorded individually, by a large team of young women.

Tomorrow's Eve

Why did Edison create Hadaly?

He had a friend, Edward Anderson, who had an affair with a young woman called Evelyn Habal; the affair wrecked Anderson's marriage and his business, and he killed himself.

Tomorrow's Eve

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

Translated by Robert Martin Adams

EDISON'S GREATEST MARVEL

Tomorrow's Eve

Edison shows a film of Evelyn Habal dancing; she looks "ravishing".

A second film shows: "a little, bloodless creature, vaguely female of gender, with dwarfish limbs, hollow cheeks, toothless jaws with practically no lips, and almost bald skull, with dim and squinting eyes, flabby lids, and wrinkled features".

Evelyn without her artificial beauty aids.

THE VITASCOPE

"Wonderful is The Vitascope. Pictures life size and full of color. Makes a thrilling show."
NEW YORK HERALD, April 24, '96.

Tomorrow's Eve

Edison opens a drawer which is full of Evelyn Habal's "relics", which include a set of false teeth that Edison plays like castanets, "grey wadding, bulging, grubby, and giving of a particularly rancid odour", a wig, and lots of half-used lotions, paints and perfumes.

Some objects ("oddly shaped to say the least") used "in the craft of rousing men to innocent transports of delight".

And "certain herbs and specimens from the shops of the chemist", which show that Evelyn Habal "did not feel herself destined for the joys of family life".

J. Grandville.

Lith. de Langlumé.

Tomorrow's Eve

According to Edison, replacing women with androids would not be much of a change.

Women like Evelyn are already artificial (a "banal assemblage of powder, rouge, false teeth, false complexions, false hair … false smiles, false glances, and false pretences of 'love'").

So, why not "have the Android herself?" His android will be better than any real woman.

Pulp fictions

Science Wonder Stories

New magazine published by Hugo Gernsback, launched 1929. Editorial claimed its purpose was as much educational as entertaining.

He guaranteed "to our readers that they will not get a false scientific education thru the perusal of these stories".
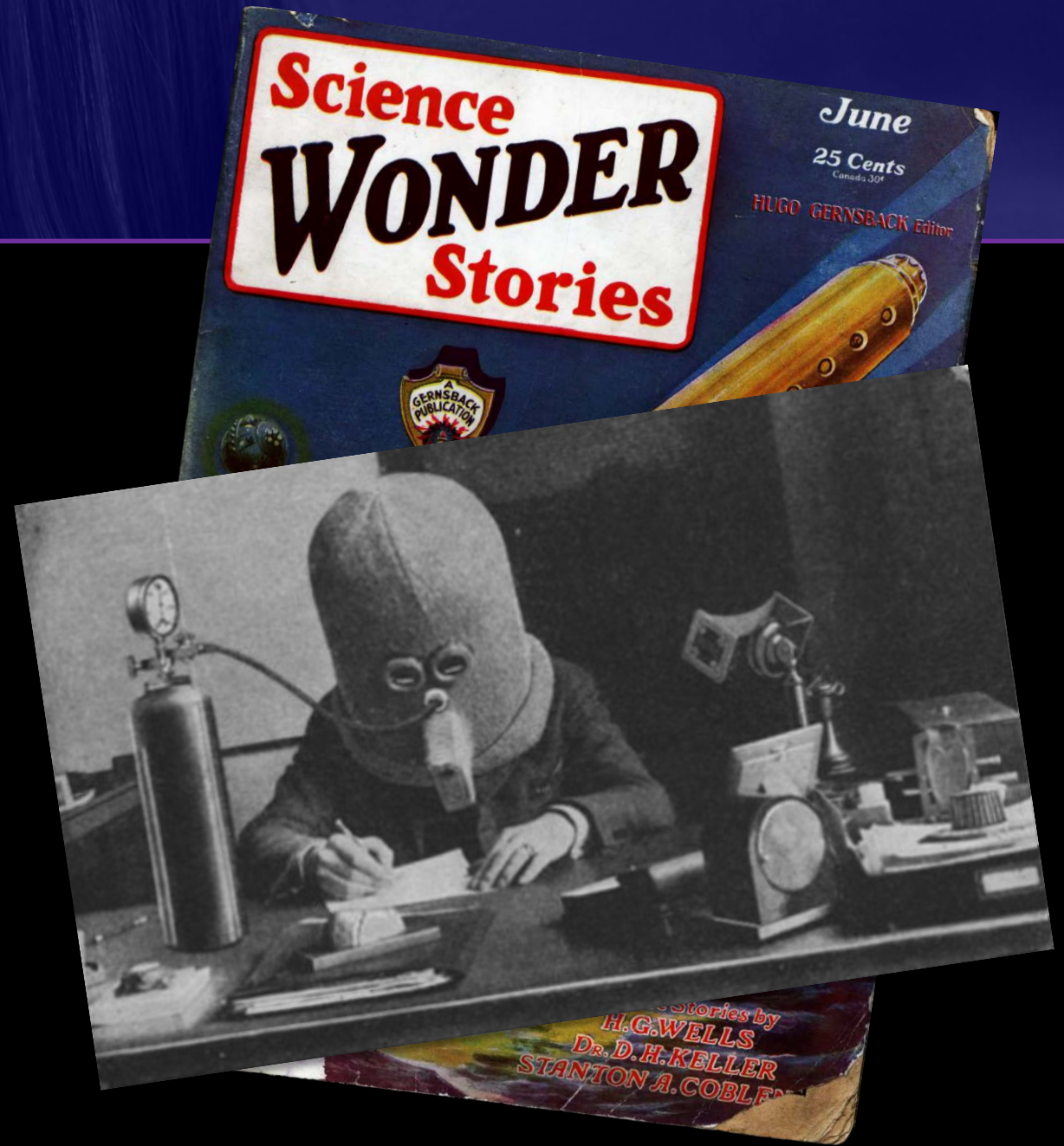
"The Marble Virgin"

Story in *Science Wonder Stories'* first issue, a re-telling of Pygmalion by first-time author Kennie McDowd.

The MARBLE Virgin

KENNIE McDOWD

And the beam of light ... ...Before my eyes I saw a wave of pink ... the beam slightly ascended so that it swept no lower than ... gold. I held my breath ... Huxhold whirled a dial, ... s. He was sobbing curses.

52

"The Marble Virgin" (1929)

The sculptor, Lands, refuses to sell, the statue (called Naomi) to his neighbour Huxhold.

So the scientist steals it, places it in his "electro-dissolver cabinet", which brings it to life using "Huxhold Rays".

The MARBLE Virgin
By Kennie McDowd

And the beam of light coming from the horn changed from fiery incandescence to gold. I held my breath ...Before my eyes I saw a wave of pink flood her body and climb into her face. Huxhold whirled a dial, the beam slightly ascended so that it swept no lower than the bottom of her toes. He was sobbing curses.

52

"The Marble Virgin"

The now living Naomi runs around the studio naked while constantly kissing the sculptor. All she can say is "Oooo" and "I love you Wal-ly".


The MARBLE Virgin

By Kennie McDowd

PAUL

And the beam of light coming from the horn changed from fiery incandescence to gold. I held my breath . . . Before my eyes I saw a wave of pink flood her body and climb into her face. Huxhold whirled a dial, the beam slightly ascended so that it swept no lower than the bottom of her toes. He was sobbing curses.

52

"Helen O'Loy" (1938)

Story by Lester del Rey (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1938). Two men, Phil (who's an specialist in hormones and emotions) and Dave (who runs a robot repair shop), become dissatisfied with their robot housekeeper (after she puts vanilla on a steak instead of salt).

THE BEST OF
Lester Del Rey
introduction by Frederik Pohl
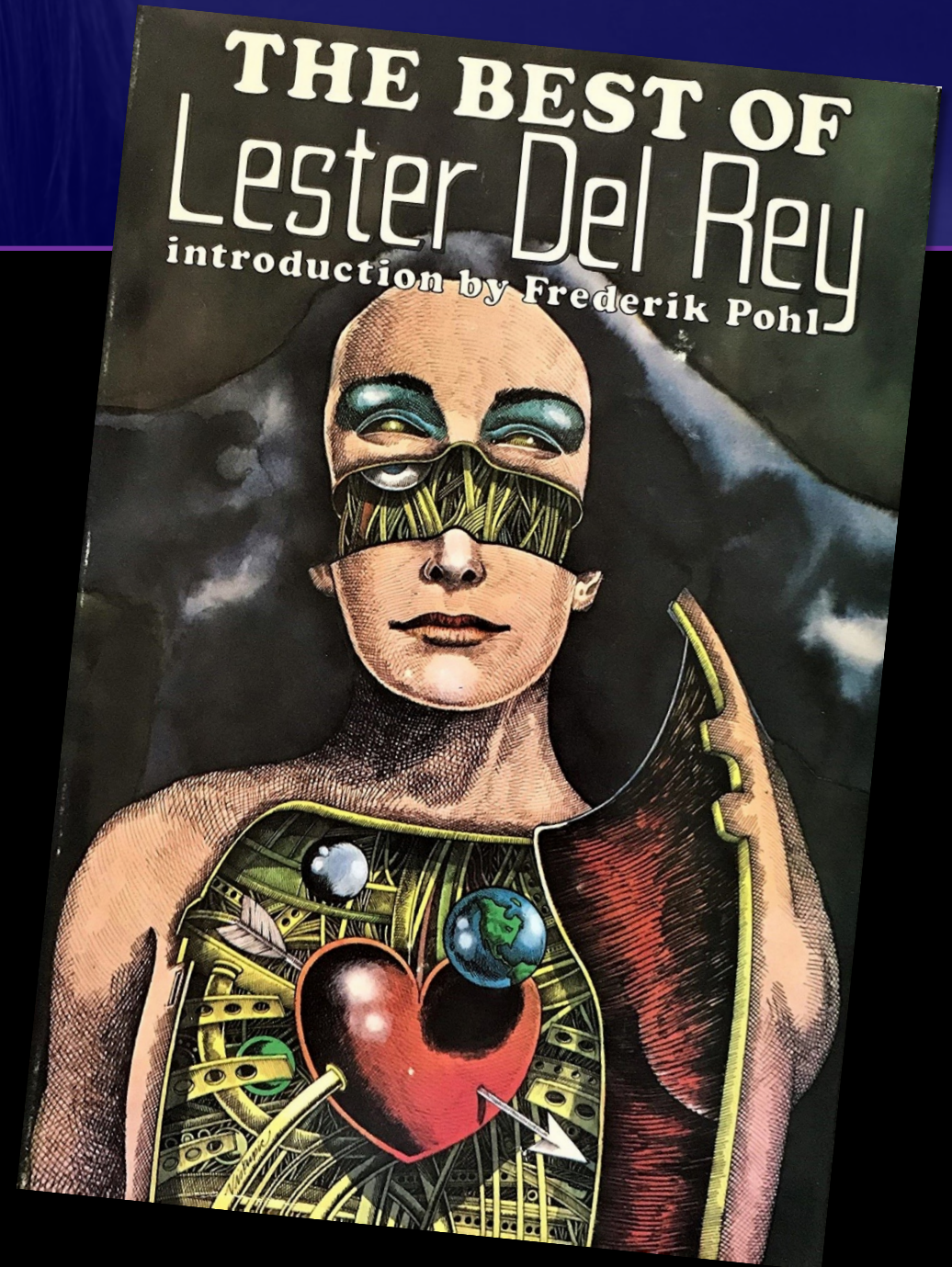
"Helen O'Loy" (1938)

New model is a success, but the newly activated robot needs educating in human manners, emotions and social conventions in order to work efficiently. Dave leaves her alone for a day, to watch soap operas and read romance novels.

THE BEST OF Lester Del Rey
introduction by Frederik Pohl
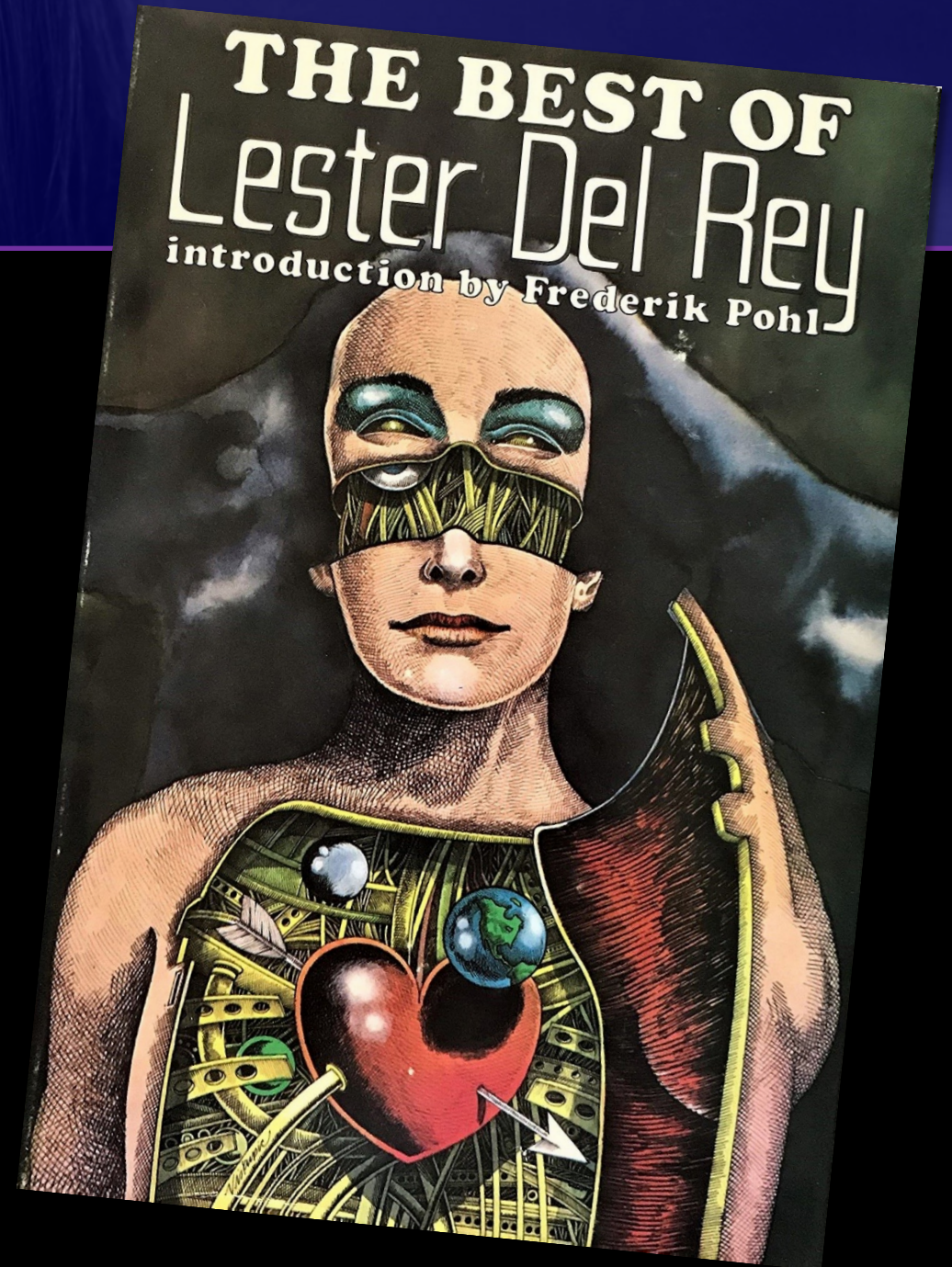
"Helen O'Loy" (1938)

Helen tells Phil that she really is in love with Dave:

"I'm a woman. And you know how perfectly I'm made to imitate a real woman … in all ways. I couldn't give him sons, but in every other way … I'd try so hard, I know I'd make a good wife".

THE BEST OF
Lester Del Rey
introduction by Frederik Pohl
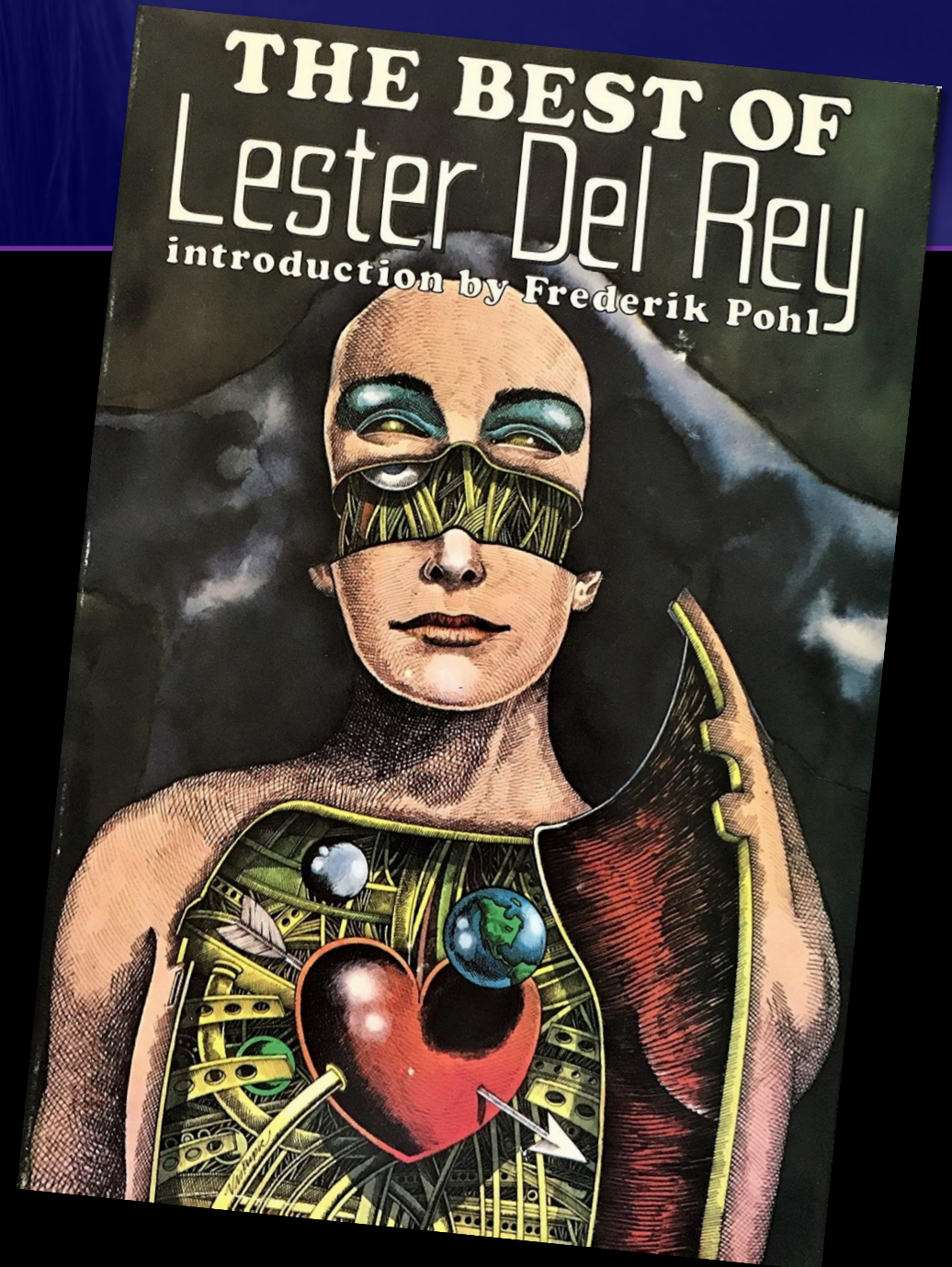
"intergalactic suburbia"

Term coined by Joanna Russ ("The Image of Women in Science Fiction", 1970).

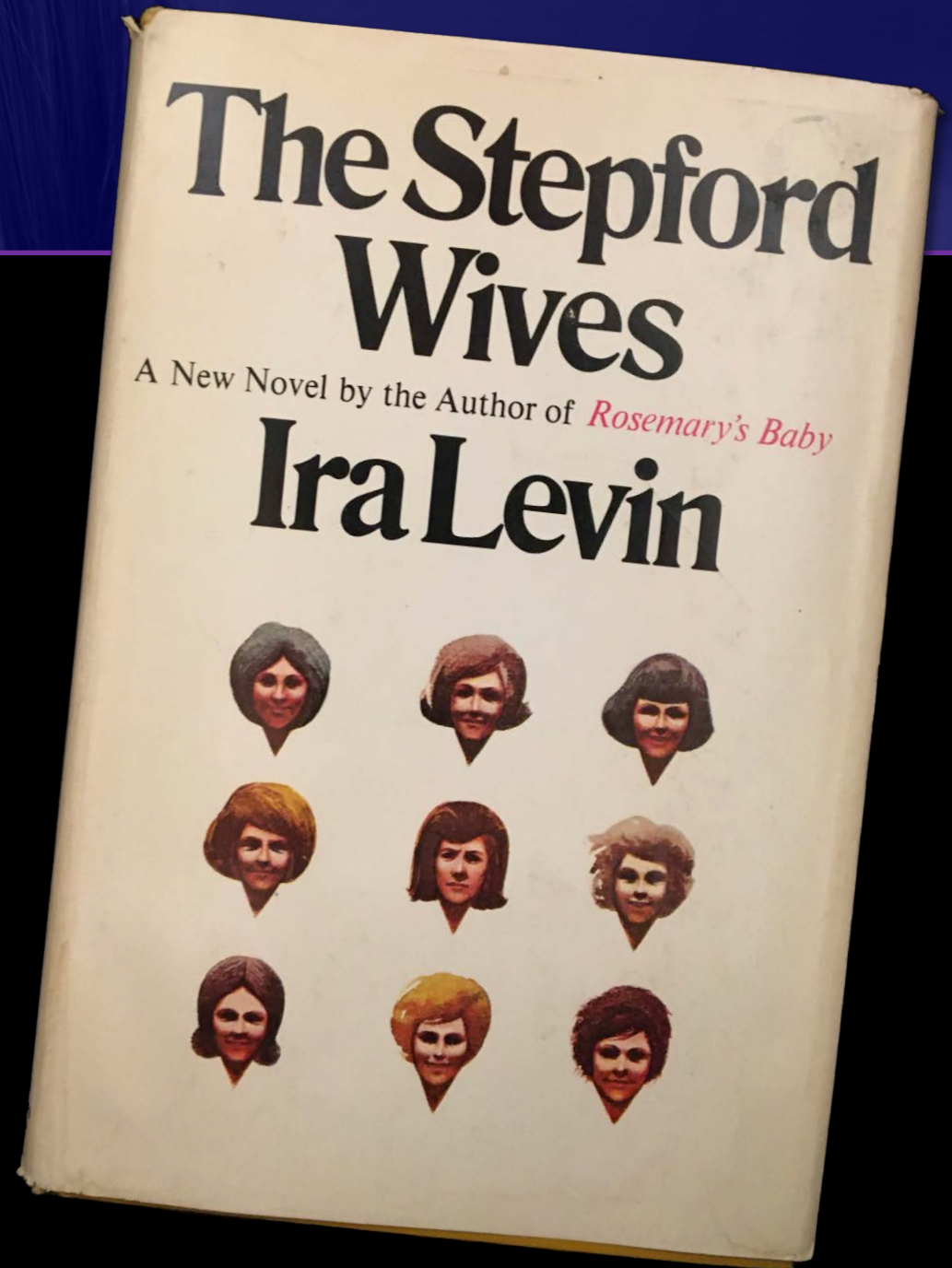So-called 'classic' SF was willing to imagine everything changing…

… except traditional gender roles.

The Stepford Wives (1972)

By Ira Levin. Main character, Joanna Eberhard, and her family move to the town of Stepford.

Joanna is appalled by the other women:

The Stepford Wives (1972)

"That's what they all were, all the Stepford wives: actresses in commercials, pleased with detergents and floor wax, with cleansers, shampoos, and deodorants. Pretty actresses, big in the bosom, small in the talent, playing suburban housewives unconvincingly, too nicely-nice to be real".
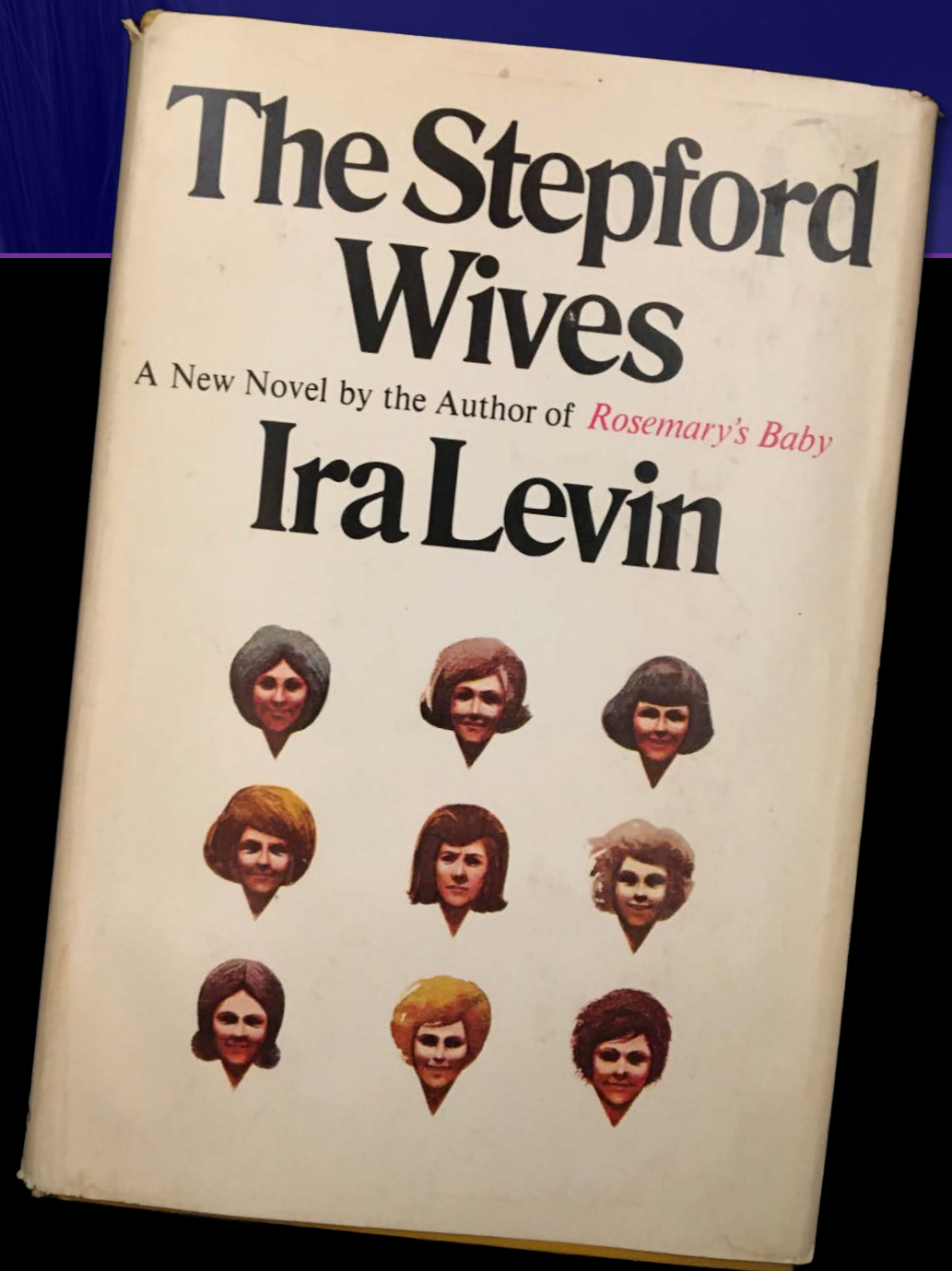
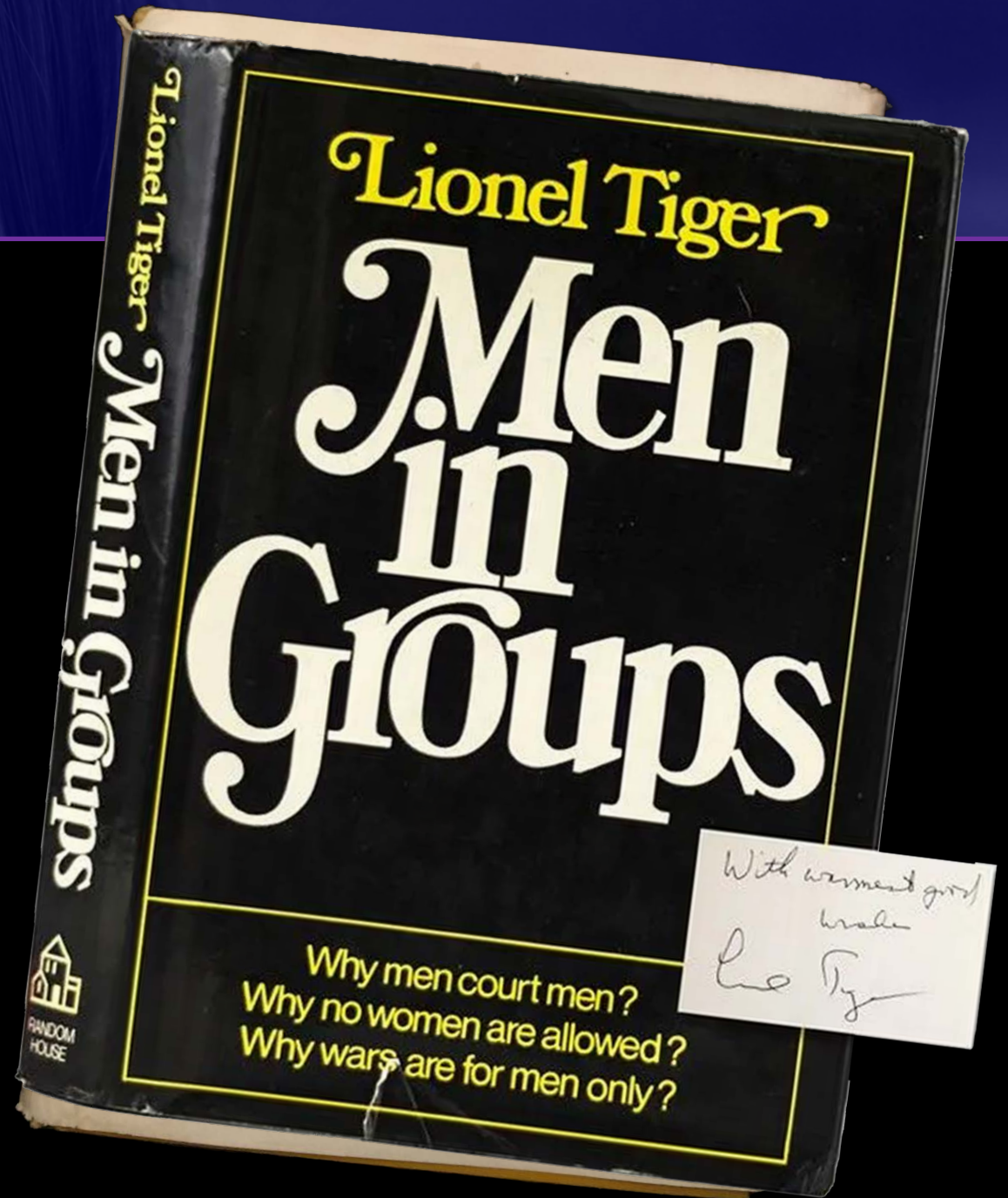## *The Stepford Wives* (1972)

Current science used to frame the story and add plausibility.

When Joanna first looks out at her backyard she thinks "Robert Ardrey is right... I feel very territorial".
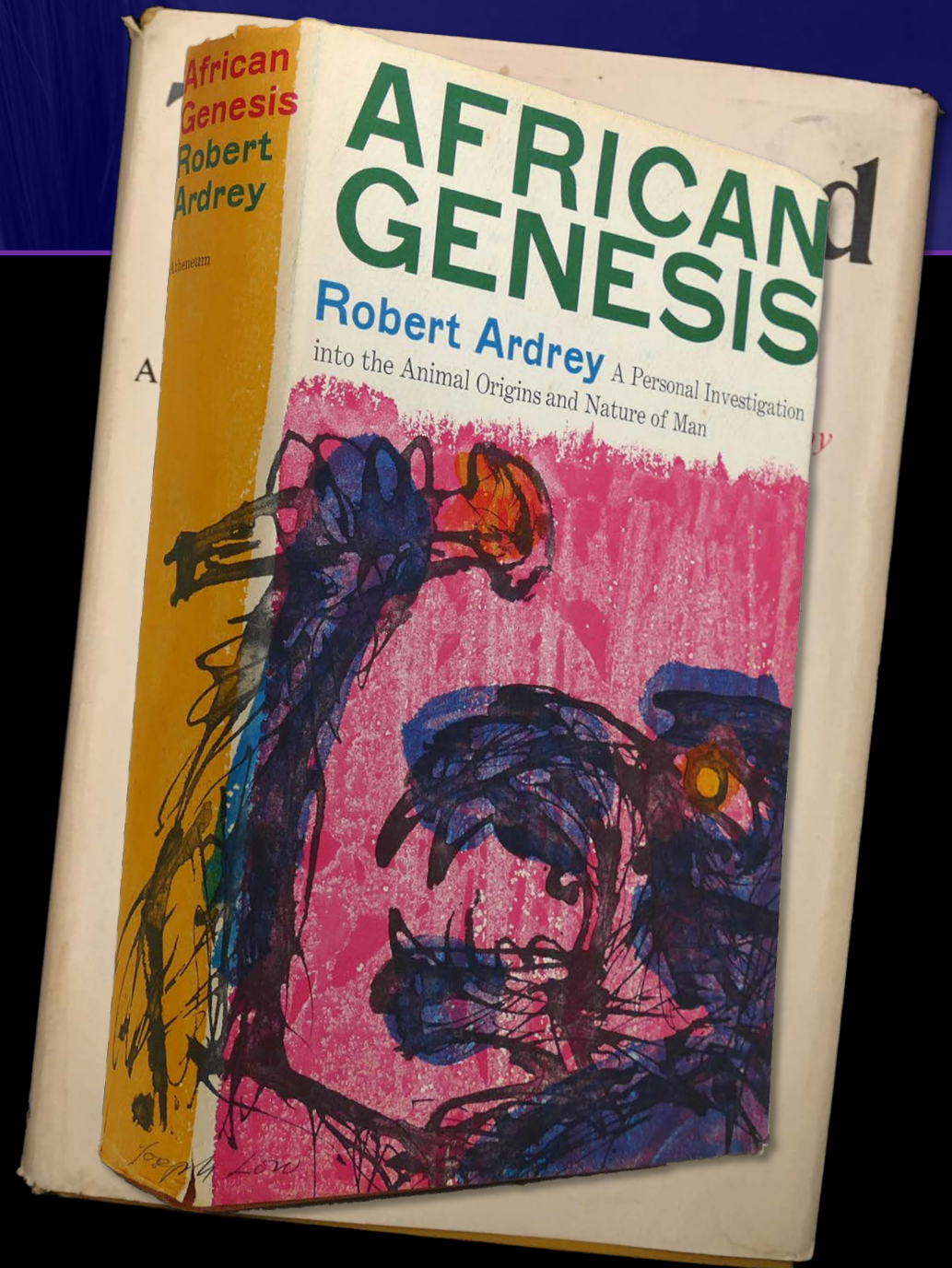
***The Stepford Wives* (1972)**

One of the husbands is reading Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups* (1969), about the supposed 'crisis in masculinity' caused by feminism.

The Stepford Wives (1975)

First movie version (dir. Bryan Forbes).

When dad arrives, their daughter says she just saw a man carrying a naked lady.

Dad replies, "That's why we're moving to Stepford!").

The Stepford Wives

Joanna is convinced that the Stepford Men's Association is somehow responsible for the way the women change.

Their leader, Dale Coba, is nicknamed "Diz" because he worked for Disneyworld.

The Stepford Wives

Response to late-Sixties anxieties and new social movements.

Betty Friedan once addressed a women's group in Stepford. *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is also mentioned.
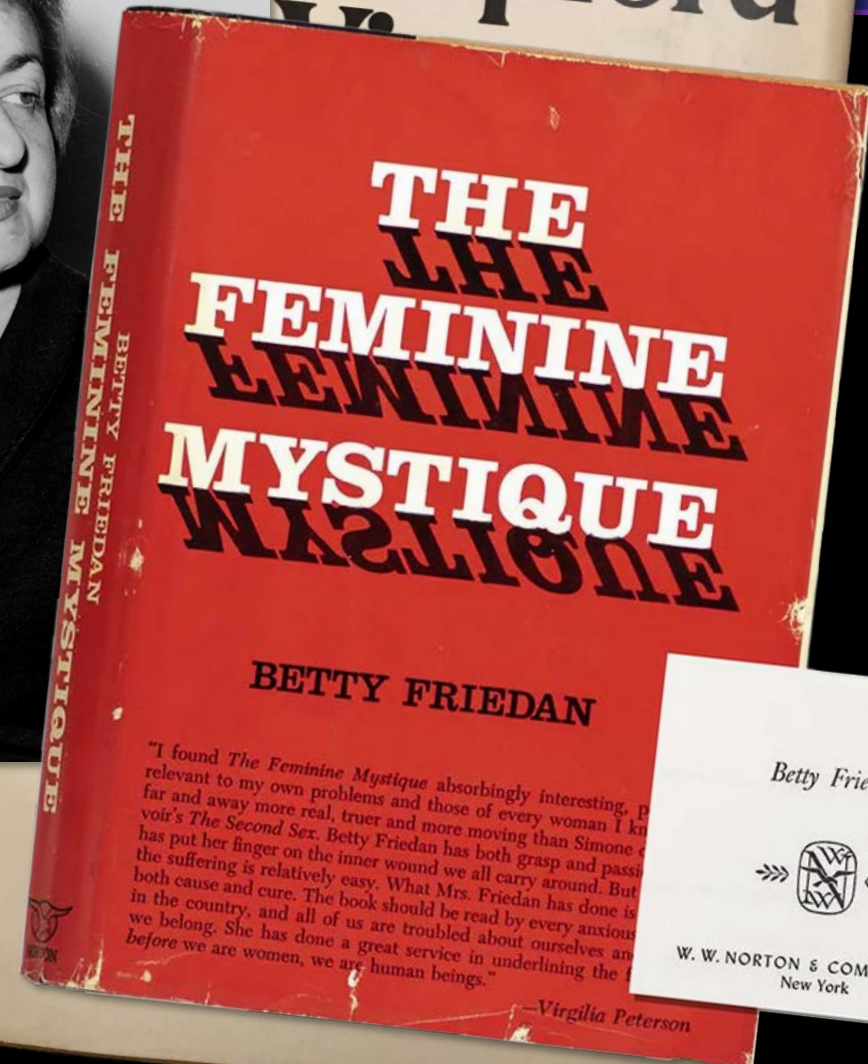
The Stepford Wives (1975)

Are they robots?

Clearly the film's Italian distributors were in no doubt (they gave the film the title "The Wives Factory").

But Levin's original novel is more ambiguous.

CLASSIC SCIENCE FICTION
EDITED BY LESTER DEL REY

Ballantine 28952 $2.25

A DEL REY BOOK

SF

THE BEST OF C.L. MOORE

A SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB SELECTION

HILDE

12 SPARKLING STORIES BY
James Tiptree, Jr.

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BALLANTINE BOOKS

SF

Warm Worlds And Otherwise

INCLUDING THE
AWARD-WINNERS
LOVE IS THE
PLAN, THE
PLAN IS DEATH &
THE GIRL WHO
WAS PLUGGED IN
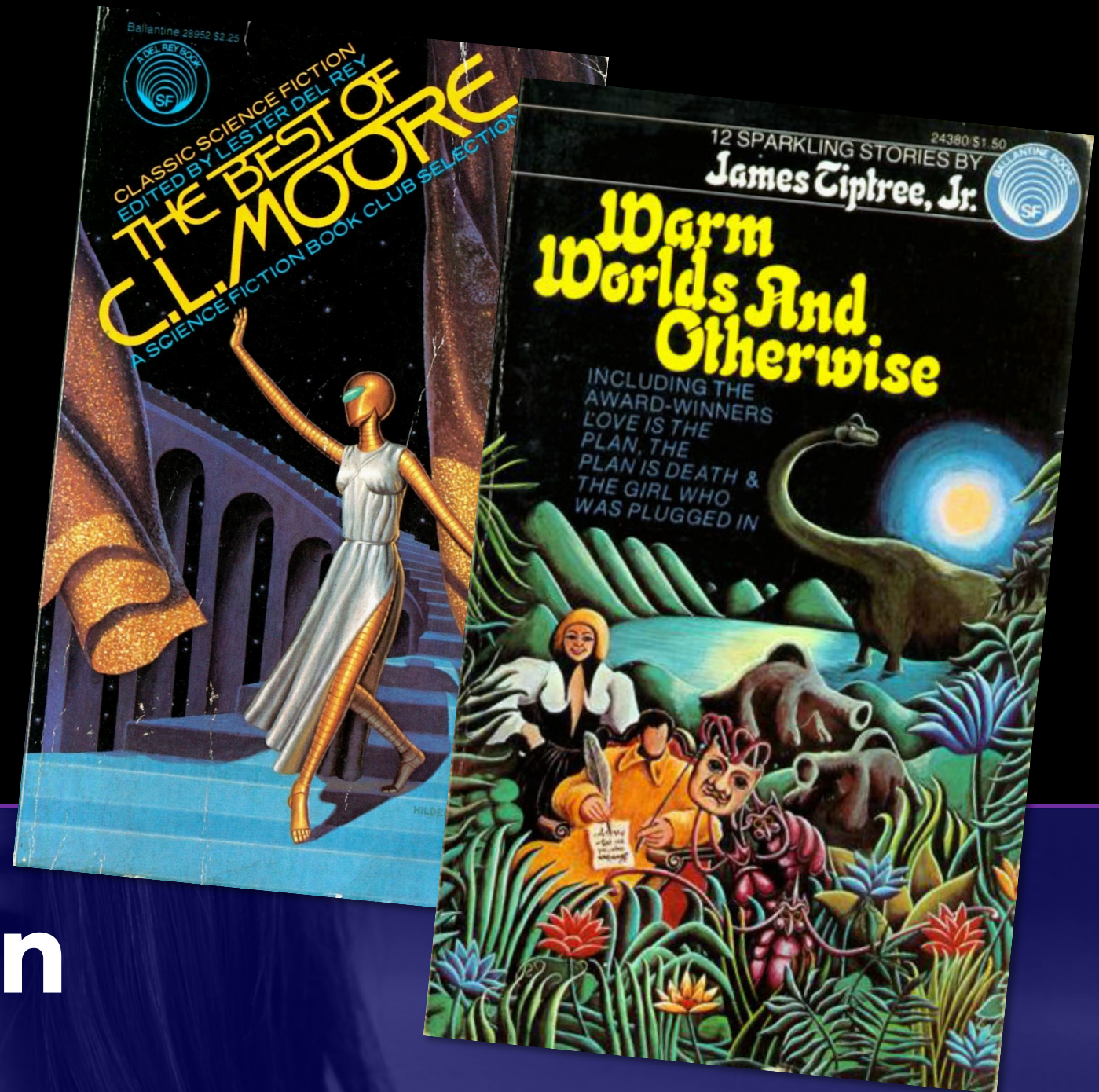
No woman born

Acting like a woman

"The Sandman" suggested that femininity was a kind of performance, which had to be done well (but not *too* well).

Catherine Lucille (C.L.) Moore's "No Woman Born" (1944).

"No Woman Born" (1944)

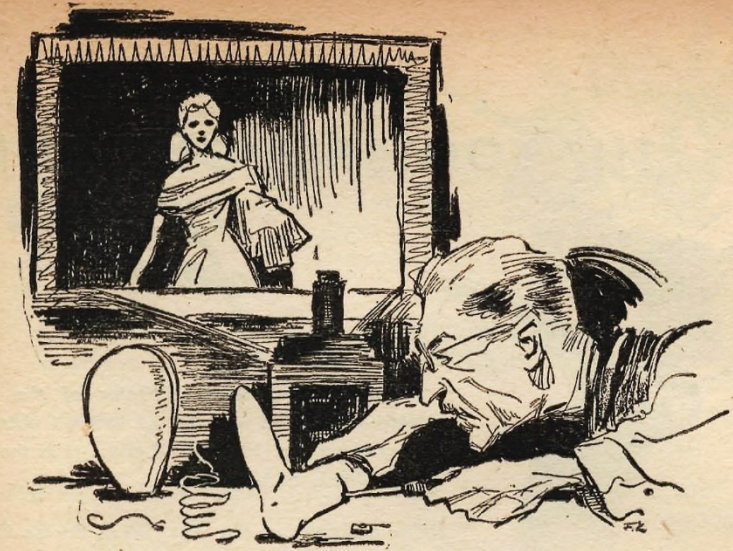Dierdre, a world-famous dancer and singer almost dies in a fire. Her body was burned, but her brain survived and was kept alive while a scientist called Maltzer created a new metal body for her.

Story narrated by her manager, John Harris, describes meeting the new Dierdre for the first time.

No Woman Born

by C. L. MOORE

She had been beautiful—before the fire. Now she was living again, in a sense, but as a robot. Could personality show through a robot . . .

Illustrated by Kramer

She had been the loveliest creature whose image ever moved along the airways. John Harris, who was once her manager, remembered doggedly how beautiful she had been as he rose in the silent elevator toward the room where Deirdre sat waiting for him.

Since the theater fire that had destroyed her a year ago, he had never been quite able to let himself remember her beauty clearly, except when some old poster, half in tatters, flaunted her face at him, or a maudlin memorial program flashed her image unexpectedly across the television screen. But now he had to remember.

134   ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION

"No Woman Born" (1944)

New body is golden and graceful. No face or eyes (just a blue, crescent shaped mask).

And "Oddly enough, he did not once think of the naked brain that must lie inside the metal".
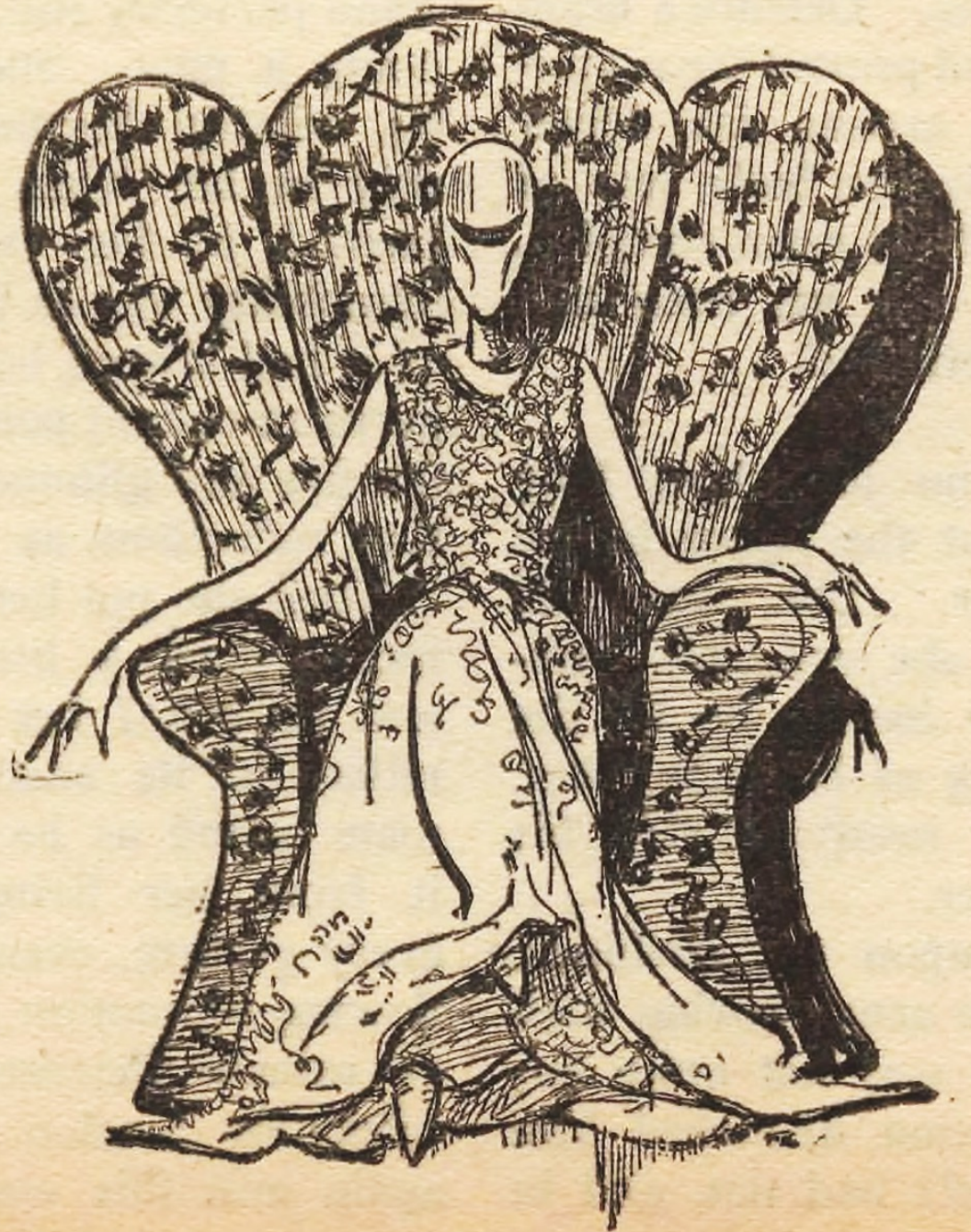
"No Woman Born" (1944)

Dierdre's body consists of metal rings, held together by electromagnetic currents that she controls directly with her brain.

Her movements are as graceful and fluid as ever (or better), she sings perfectly (almost too well) and has the same, sexy, throaty laugh she always possessed.

"No Woman Born" (1944)

Maltzer insists she's frail and imperfect:

"She hasn't any sex. She isn't female any more". Merely "an abstraction" who has "lost everything that made her essentially what the public wanted".

"One of the strongest stimuli to a woman of her type was the knowledge of sex competition. You know how she sparkled when a man came into the room? All that's gone, and it was an essential"

"No Woman Born" (1944)

Dierdre rejects the men's attempts to constrain or define her:

"I'm not a Frankenstein monster made out of dead flesh. I'm myself—alive. You didn't create my life, you only preserved it. I'm not a robot, with compulsions built into me that I have to obey. I'm free-willed and independent, and, Maltzer—I'm human".

"No Woman Born" (1944)

Part of her claim to humanity is:

"The magnetic muscles that hold it into my own shape and motions will let go when the brain lets go, and there'll be nothing but a … a pile of disconnected rings. If they ever assemble it again, it won't be me."

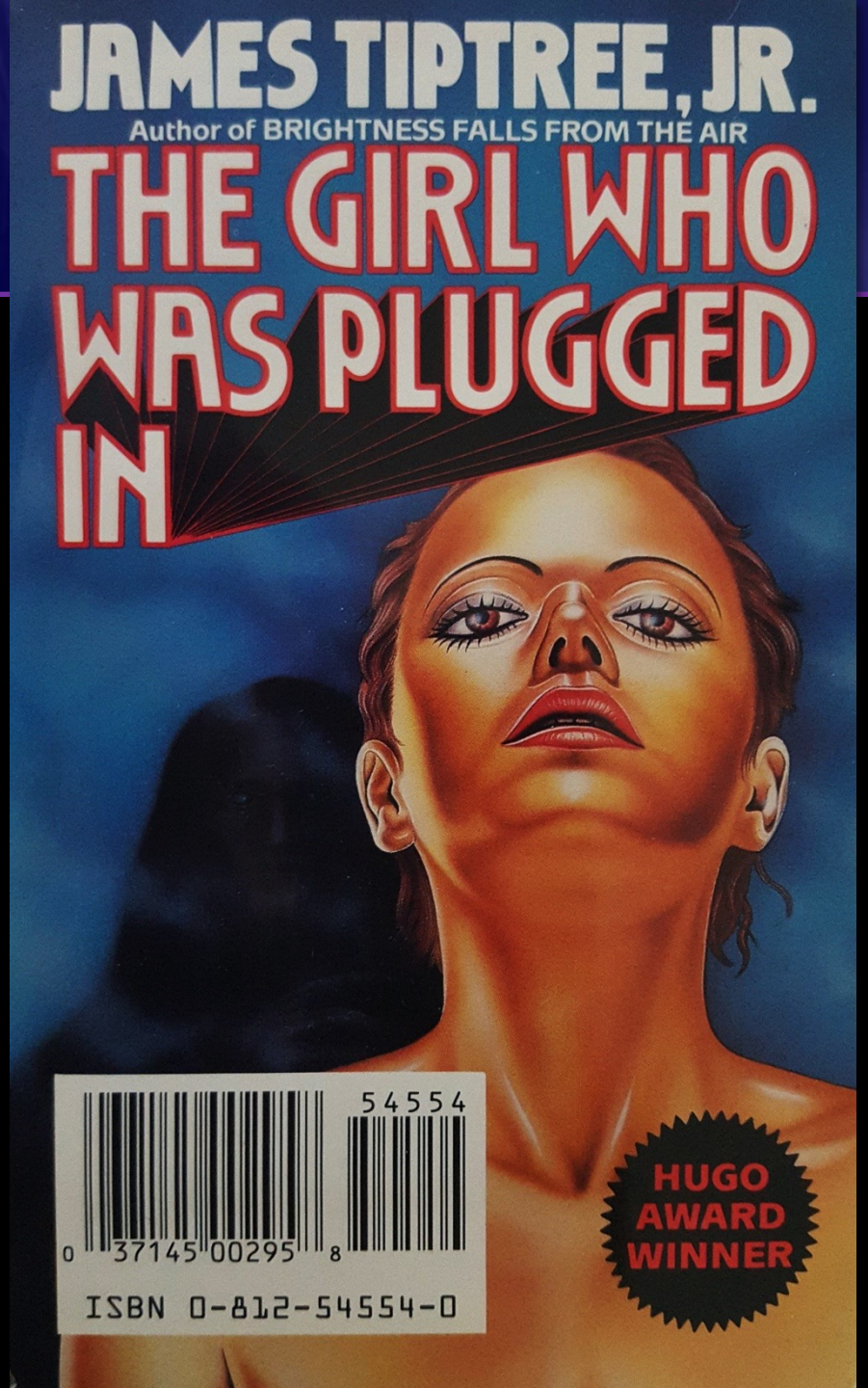She hesitated. "I like that, John," she said, and he felt from behind the mask a searching of his face".

"The Girl who was plugged in" (1973)

By James Tiptree Jr.

Story is about P. Burke, described as "the ugly of the world. A tall monument to pituitary dystrophy".

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.
Author of BRIGHTNESS FALLS FROM THE AIR
THE GIRL WHO WAS PLUGGED IN

HUGO AWARD WINNER

54554

ISBN 0-812-54554-0

"The Girl who was plugged in" (1973)

Burke tried to kill herself, but is 'rescued' by Global Transmissions Corporation (GTX), who take an interest in her because their computers have identified her as having unusual brain patterns.

She would make an ideal 'remote', controlling a flesh and blood android called Delphi.

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

Author of BRIGHTNESS FALLS FROM THE AIR

THE GIRL WHO WAS PLUGGED IN

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HUGO AWARD WINNER

"The Girl who was plugged in" (1973)

Burke is trained to make the most of her skills:

"How to walk, sit, eat, speak, blow her nose, how to stumble, to urinate, to hiccup—DELICIOUSLY. How to make each nose-blow or shrug delightfully, subtly different from any ever spooled before".

"The Girl who was plugged in" (1973)

To do this, she needs implants:

"And here is our girl, looking— If possible, worse than before. (You thought this was Cinderella transistorized?)

"The disimprovement in her looks comes from the electrode jacks peeping out of her sparse hair, and there are other meldings of flesh and metal".

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

Author of BRIGHTNESS FALLS FROM THE AIR

THE GIRL WHO WAS PLUGGED IN

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ISBN 0-812-54554-0

"The Girl who was plugged in" (1973)

By contrast, Delphi (which his who the viewers/ "spoolers" experience) is:

"the darlingest girl child you've EVER seen. She quivers—porno for angels".

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.
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THE GIRL WHO WAS PLUGGED IN

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0 37145 00295 8

ISBN 0-812-54554-0

James Tiptree, Jr.

Story appeared in an anthology, introduced by Robert Silverberg:

"It has been suggested that Tiptree is female, a theory that I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing. I don't think the novels of Jane Austen could have been written by a man nor the stories of Ernest Hemingway by a woman, and in the same way I believe the author of the James Tiptree stories is male".
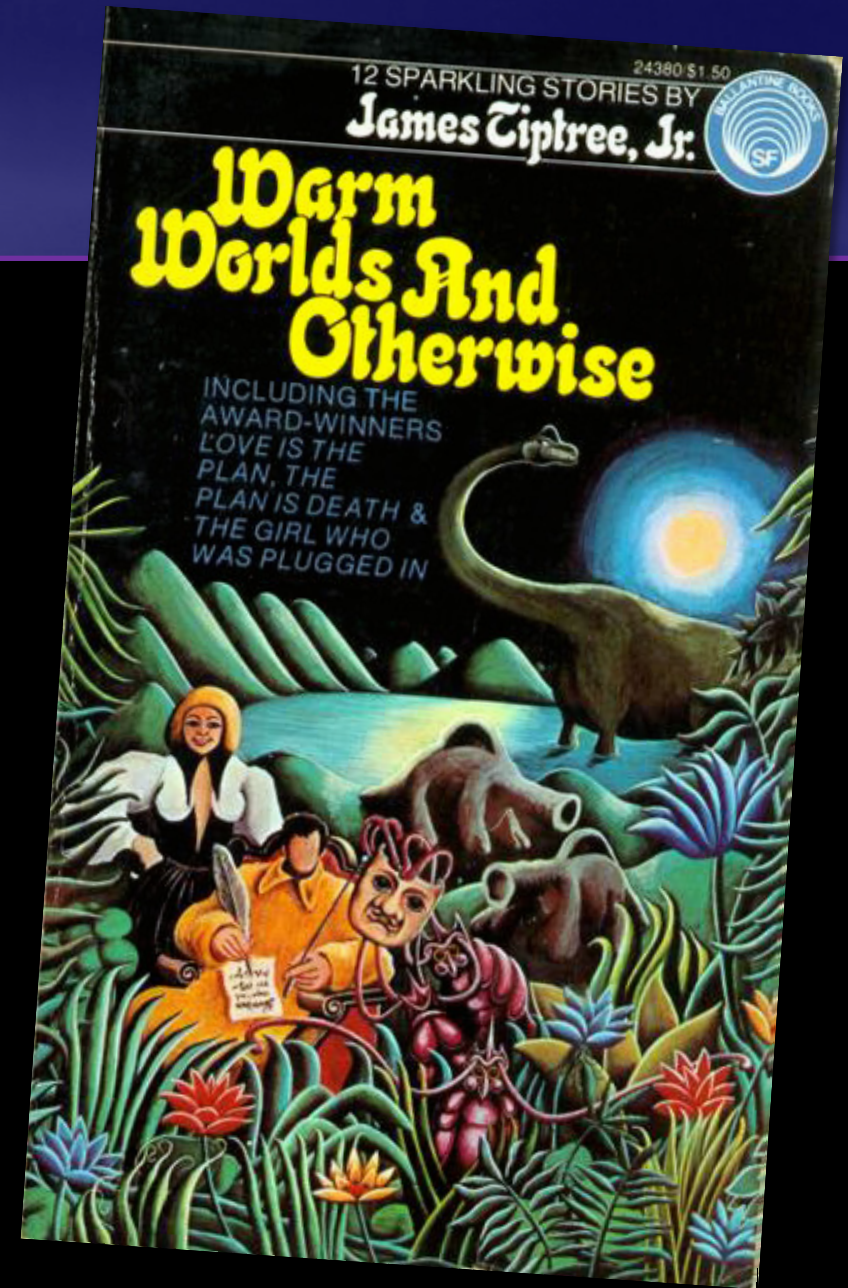
James Tiptree, Jr.

The pen name of Alice Hastings Bradley Sheldon (1915–1987), a popular SF author who was assumed to be a man until accidentally 'outed' in 1977.

From Spain to TIPTREE come the best Seville Oranges

TIPTREE A marmalade that's sheer golden deliciousness with the really tender peel in medium-thick strips. Made only from the finest Seville oranges and pure sugar. In 1 lb. jars 2/-

TAWNY For those who like to come across luscious chunks of glistening peel, this Seville orange marmalade is delight indeed.
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Also TIPTREE CHUTNEY. Not too hot, not too sweet, Tiptree Chutney is the perfect accompaniment to cold meats of all kinds. Raisins are added to make this very agreeable Chutney.

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James Tiptree, Jr.

To his credit, Silverberg reprinted his original comments in the second edition (1979), commented that Tiptree/Sheldon had forced him to rethink his assumptions about the supposed naturalness of gender. She

"called into question the entire notion of what is 'masculine' or 'feminine' in fiction.

"I am still wrestling with that".
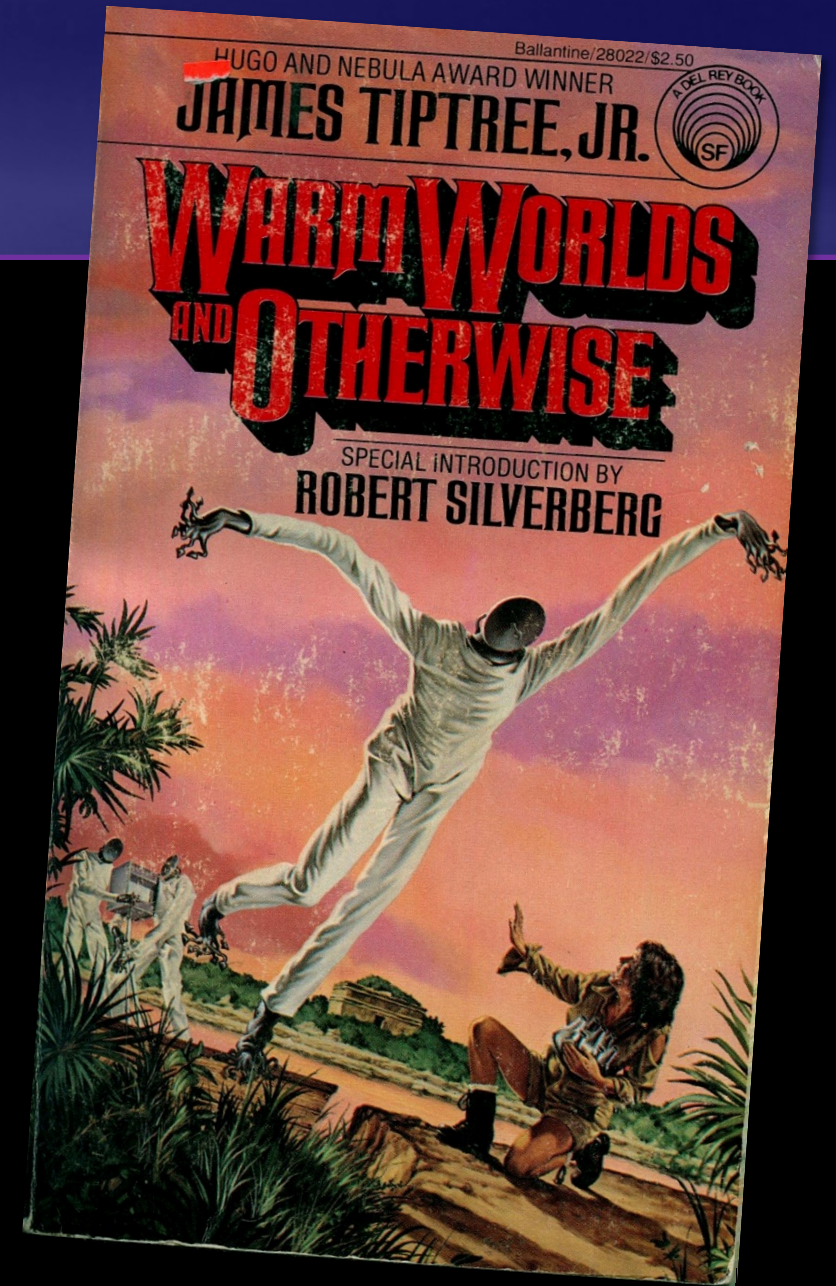
James Tiptree, Jr.

Alice Sheldon privately made the link between herself and her story:

She was "an old lady in Virginia", who – like P. Burke – had an unacceptable body – unacceptable to a majority-male SF audience, at least.

While 'Tiptree' was Delphi, a publicly desirable alternative body

"Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too"

Black Mirror episode (written by Charlie Brooker, directed by Anne Sewitsky, Netflix, 2019). Starring Miley Cyrus.

Some conclusions

Ideal women?

In *Tomorrow's Eve*, Hadaly promises Ewald "I have so many women in me, no harem could contain them all".

Edison explains that, once he's done his work:

"the present gorgeous little fool will no longer be a woman, but an angel; no longer a mistress but a lover; no longer reality, but the IDEAL!".

Are women human?

The idea that gender is a masquerade (not an innate biological essence), hinted at by Hoffman, Moore and Tiptree suggests that the answer is more interesting than simply saying "yes".

The question forces us to think about how – and why – society wants to define both 'women' and 'human'.