

ROSE-TINTED GOGGLES

When I was in school, SF was usually labeled “escapist fiction.” Since the stories were often set in the future and dealt with aliens or mind reading or time travel, it was assumed that they glossed over real life issues. My teachers assured me that I would soon outgrow my fascination with science fiction and settle down with more adult literature. As an inveterate reader, I actually enjoyed all sorts of fiction and I knew that while there were many different types of conventional tales, there were just as many varieties of SF. I might read Edgar Rice Burroughs just for fun, but Robert Silverberg and Ursula K. Le Guin were as capable of shining the cold light of reality on the human condition as any mainstream author. Still, one thing science fiction certainly had going for it was its cool toys.

An early enthusiasm for SF is often sparked by these toys—starships, ray-guns, and alien action-figures can capture a child’s imagination long before they read through *Dune* or *The Foundation Trilogy*. Although I discovered the toys long after I began reading the stories, I’m still a sucker for novelty space-ships and little red robots. On a superficial level, at least, one of the major attractions of the relatively new sub-genre, steampunk, is its *really* cool toys. Steampunk has goggles and dirigibles, it has dress-up clothes for you or your dolls and gorgeous brass time machines. Most of all, steampunk has trains.

As a child, we want to get down on our hands and knees and play with those trains. Who doesn’t enjoy watching the little train choo-chooing past the Victorian village under the Christmas tree? As adults, it’s easy to imagine ourselves riding in a first-class compartment—dining off bone china and sipping wine from cut

crystal glassware. Speeding into the past, our imagination takes us away on these trains almost as fast as the rocket ships of our daydreams take us into the future.

Of course, just as accurate predictions of the future are rare in SF, so too are realistic depictions of the past. We know that most of the people who traveled in those trains weren’t riding in first class. About ten years ago, it was a toy, though not an SF toy, that led me to a vivid description of what an 1854 trip from New York to Chicago might have been like. My daughter had received the now discontinued Kirsten Larson American Girl doll for Christmas along with an introductory book called *Meet Kirsten* by Janet Beeler Shaw. The young Swedish immigrant’s journey does not sound romantic: “Inside, the train was so hot it felt ready to explode. There was coal grit on the floor and cinders in the air. Kirsten could hardly get her breath. She saw that the windows had been nailed shut. The agent said the train would be safer this way.” Although Kirsten, her mother, and younger brother find a seat on a hard wooden bench, her father and older brother stand all the way to Chicago.

We know life was hard during the industrial revolution. We’ve studied the era in school and heard about the difficulties from our relatives. Stricter workplace laws protect most of us from the conditions our grandparents and great-grandparents labored under. I’m thankful that unlike my not-so-distant ancestors, I wasn’t chained to a machine in the paper mills as a tween or sent down into the coalmines as soon as I turned eight.

Authors Nisi Shawl and Charles Stross have both lobbed cogent criticism at the way some steampunk seems to

view history through rose-tinted goggles. While Charlie blasts the subgenre from his blog for everything from glutting the fiction market to celebrating totalitarianism and overlooking the exploitation of women and children, Nisi takes a more targeted approach. At *Tor.com*, she argues that the stories she's read have "Almost without exception . . . glorified British Victorian imperialism. They did this despite the fact that many of the cultural, scientific, and aesthetic elements steampunk celebrates had been appropriated from nations the British Empire conquered."

I recognize the tendency to gloss over the past is a factor in many types of historical fiction. Sometimes fiction makes historical eras seem as real as the world outside my front door. Other times the author's past really is a "foreign country"—one that bears no more resemblance to history than those confectionary Victorian houses under the Christmas tree ever resembled the average American home. There are times when I read to be entertained and times when I read for edification. Often I am edified even while being entertained. I've enjoyed stories that look unflinchingly at the issues Nisi raises and I've enjoyed stories set in a past of the author's creation that seemed almost entirely divorced from reality. The most rewarding of any of these tales never fail to teach me something about what it means to be human.

When I read fiction, I rarely think about whether the character or the author has an agenda. I avoid didactic prose at every opportunity. Yet the best stories are usually ones where real-life concerns have been subtly interwoven into the fabric of the tale. I'm sure authors will continue to borrow toys from steampunk to fashion marvelous dioramas for their train set. Nisi and Charlie offer great food for thought and for future stories. I'm looking forward to seeing to seeing new work from authors who push steampunk's boundaries by reflecting on these issues as well. ○