

Fantastic Feminism: An Interview with Author Tam MacNeil

By Zoe Dickinson

Tam MacNeil is an author of all sorts of fiction based in Victoria, BC. Her young adult series, published by QueerTeen Press, features queer teen protagonists in a fascinating steampunk/fantasy version of Japan.

Can you tell me a little about your background as an author?

I used to write short fantasy stories, so I called myself a fantasy author. Then the *Jao* books (*Onsen*, *Okatu*, *Anu* and *Doku*) came out and I started to call myself a YA author. But I've got two romances coming out this year, and I just finished a science fiction piece, so I've started calling myself a novelist and I leave it at that.

I've been writing for as long as I can remember; stories were an essential part of my upbringing. Aside from a short stint in Grade 2 where I wanted to be a portrait artist to unicorns, I have always wanted to be a writer.

Where can people find your books?

My YA books are through a brilliant little small press out of the US called JMS. They have a YA imprint exclusively dedicated to stories featuring queer protagonists called QueerTeen Press. You can get the books in paper or eBook through pretty much any online source. The internet is a wonderful thing for distribution!

Would you consider your writing to be feminist?

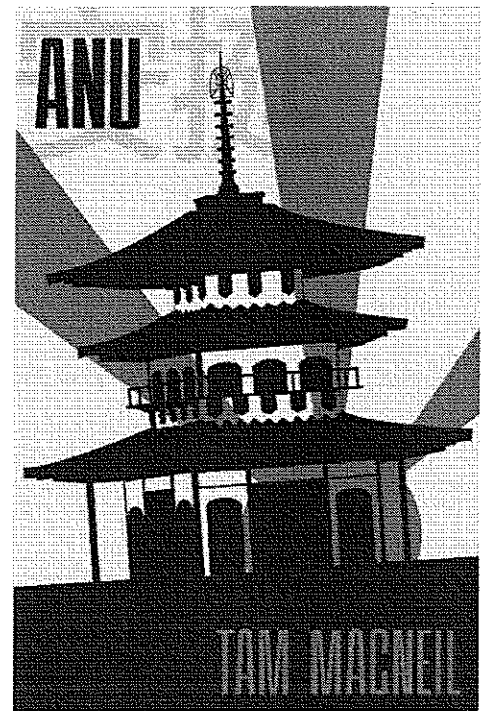
Okay, so honesty hour here. I wrote and posted a mostly gender-free science fiction novella online this year. In the course of writing that book I realized my heavy, heavy gender bias, and, looking back at the *Jao* books, I would say they're feminist insofar as they reject a lot of sexism-enforced toxic masculinity, but the women in the books are often in traditionally feminine roles. I need to fix that going forward, so the next book, *Doshu*, which will be out in June, has a female gang leader as a prime mover in the story. I also realized that I need to represent trans and non-binary characters, and I have plans for that in future books.

Are there any must-read feminist young adult books that you think every library should have in its collection?

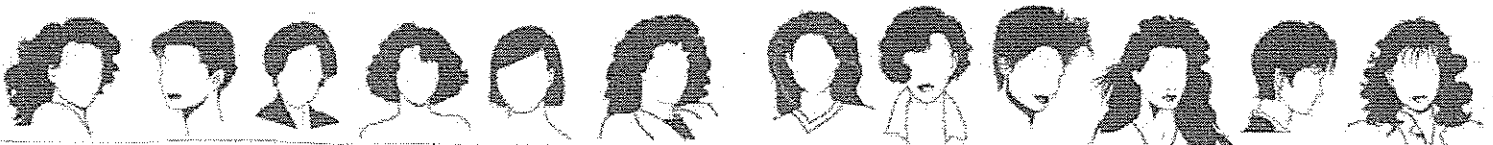
On the advice of a friend who is also an elementary school teacher, I just read *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* by Cat Valente and that's the book I'm pushing into people's hands these days.

In your experience, is YA fiction a feminist-friendly place?

Not to put too fine a point on it but I don't think the English speaking world is a terribly feminist-friendly space. I think all fiction is a way of parsing the world, so YA reflects those problems just like every other genre.



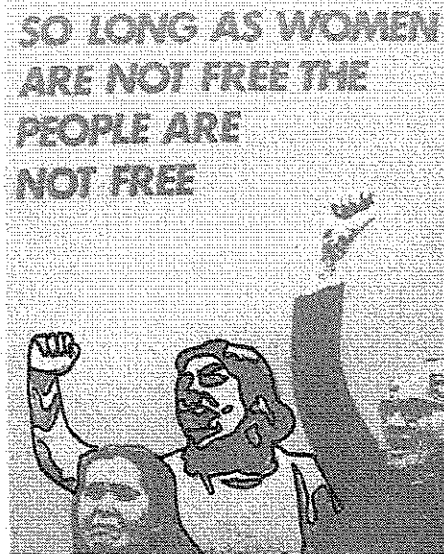
“ The New Feminism ”



Images

Anu: http://www.jms-books.com/index.php?main_page=index&manufacturers_id=116

The New Feminism: <http://www.autostraddle.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/introduction-new-feminism.jpeg>



Are there any genres you feel less welcome in as a woman?

I had a friend ask me why I don't write a superhero comic and my immediate response was, "Are you kidding? Do you know what happens to women who write those?" Up until that point I hadn't actually realized I (1) would love to write a comic and (2) hadn't entertained it as a possibility because I was female and I believed I would be unwelcome.

I grew up in the 80s and 90s and lost interest in comics when I realized that women were almost always objects and almost never characters (see also: frigid). But it turns out comics have really changed since I gave them up. Recently I've gone back to them. Now I read *Hawkeye* (Kate Bishop for President!) and *Ms. Marvel* and *Rat Queens*, and I follow Gail Simone and Kelly Sue DeConnick on social media. What I'm saying is, even in places where sexism seemed to be lodged in the marrow of the medium, things are changing.

The women who came before me have done tremendous work and as a consequence, many of the barriers they faced are no longer present for me. But I'm white, and though I'm queer, I'm married to a man, so people assume I'm straight. I have an invisible disability - a mental health condition. I pass as "normal" so I get all those benefits. I see myself represented in all kinds of stories. I am welcome in all kinds of places.

But women with visible disabilities, queer women who are in non-hetero relationships, women of colour, and trans women are still fighting battles to get just a shred of representation in media. That's a big problem. It's a huge problem. There's no "equality" if huge swaths of the population don't get represented in fiction. All of us go forward as a culture, or none of us do.

What do you think authors, publishers, libraries, readers can do to make these genres more inclusive?

I dropped out of my MLIS but I met a lot of people who went on to finish and I feel like the future of libraries is, frankly, in excellent hands. I know that you guys are challenging yourselves to pick more authors of colour, trans authors, disabled authors, queer authors, and have more diverse books featuring more diverse protagonists. This is great. It's fantastic. It's helping mainstream what used to be marginal.

If I could add one thing to what libraries are already doing, it would be to remind librarians that many books by and about marginalized people are often published by niche publishers. You might really have to hunt around for a good book with a trans protagonist for your twelve-year-old trans patron, but I hope you do.

Sales help to mainstream the margins. If books about marginalized people sell, if the audience is demonstrably there, big publishers will carry more books about Muslim girl superheroes and indigenous women saving the world. I mean, sure, every reader their book, yes. But just as importantly, every reader their hero, themselves. ☑