

Mary Robinette Kowal

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About this Person

Born: February 08, 1969 in Raliegh, North Carolina, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Novelist

Other Names: Harrison, Mary Robinette

Updated:Nov. 20, 2014

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born February 8, 1969, in Raleigh, NC; married Robert A. Kowal. **Education:** East Carolina University, degree, 1990. **Memberships:** Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (former secretary; vice president, 2010). **Addresses:** Home: Chicago, IL.

CAREER:

Puppeteer, writer, and voice-over artist. Puppeteer, 1989--, and voice actor and audiobook narrator. Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, GA, staff member; Jim Henson Productions, Hollywood, CA, staff member; Other Hand Productions, founder; *LazyTown* (CBS), Iceland, puppeteer; *Shimmer* magazine, art director; *Weird Tales* art director, 2010. Actor and puppeteer in *Elmo in Grouchland*.

AWARDS:

Two UNIMA-USA (International Puppetry Association) citations of excellence for puppetry; John W. Campbell Award, 2008, for best new writer; Hugo Award, 2011, for "For Want of a Nail;" Hugo Award for Best Novelette, 2014, for "The Lady Astronaut of Mars."

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *Scenting the Dark and Other Stories*, Subterranean Press (Burton, MI), 2009.
- (Editor) *The Hugo Award Showcase*, Prime Books, 2010.
- *Shades of Milk and Honey* (novel), Tor (New York, NY), 2010.
- *Glamour in a Glass* (novel), Tor (New York, NY), 2012.
- *Without a Summer* (novel), Tor (New York, NY), 2013.

Author of the blog *Mary Robinette Kowal*. Contributor to anthologies, including *Science Fiction: The Best of the Year*, 2008. Contributor of short stories to periodicals, including *Cosmos*, *Strange*

Horizons, *Apex Digest*, *Asimov's*, and *Talebones* magazine. Kowal's papers are housed at Northern Illinois University.

Sidelights

Mary Robinette Kowal is a professional puppeteer, writer, and voice-over artist. Her puppet designs have received citations of excellence from the American chapter of the International Puppetry Association. Kowal is also the author of science fiction stories, several of which are collected in *Scenting the Dark and Other Stories*.

Kowal then crossed over into long fiction with her first novel, *Shades of Milk and Honey*, a science fiction fantasy tale set in Regency England and inspired by Jane Austen. Kowal discussed the disparities between writing short stories and writing a novel in a *Geek Dad* Web site interview with Jenny Williams. "Mostly it's different in the details," she remarked. "The idea of what makes a satisfying character arc remain the same, but when working in novel length I can add more characters, locations and plot elements. The thing that is nice about that, for me, is that each element allows me to explore a different aspect of my characters. In theater we sometimes say that 'acting is reacting.' In other words, you understand someone based on how they react to a given situation. Novel length gives me more situations which, in turn, allows me to see more facets."

Several characters populate *Shades of Milk and Honey*, which stars two sisters of marriageable age, Jane and Melody. Jane possesses a prodigious magical talent, but Melody is a renowned beauty. Both hope to make a good match, and each attracts several suitors. Jane is enamored of the glamour artist David Vincent, and she hopes to learn more magic from him as well. Melody, however, chooses a man who is sure to break her heart. In the meantime, both Jane and Melody become involved in their neighbors' lives, with explosive results. Comparing her tale to Austen's novels in her interview with Williams, Kowal pointed out that "the most obvious difference is that *Shades of Milk and Honey* has magic in it. Beyond that, I tried to write a book that I thought Miss Austen might have written if she had lived in a world where magic worked." Kowal went on to note: "I also tried to keep in mind that the book would be read by people for whom 1814 England is a foreign place, which meant that I had to put in more clues about social settings than I would have if it were contemporary. For instance, in one scene I have a character realize that she is alone with a man. A reader from Miss Austen's time would have instantly understood what that meant, but I can't count on that knowledge in a modern reader."

Reviewers did not seem thrown by the historical setting or its details, and in fact applauded the subtle and effective addition of a magical element. For instance, Rebecca Gerber, writing in *Booklist*, called *Shades of Milk and Honey* a "delightful story" and "a quick, light read." On the other hand, a *Publishers Weekly* critic felt that "the story plods at a wooden pace until the climax." Stacy Hayman, assessing the book in *Library Journal*, was far more impressed, and she declared: "Readers will be disappointed only when they finish this enchanting story, which is suffused with genteel charm." In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Michael Berry proffered additional praise, remarking that the author "sets her ... mark on this kind of comedy." Berry then asserted that Kowal "creates a low-key and witty debut novel, one that succeeds through understated humor and sprightly prose." On the *Boing Boing* Web site, Cory Doctorow advised that "Kowal's first novel is a beautifully told story of being true: true to love, true to family, and true to art, even when it seems that one of them must give."

In 2012 Kowal published the novel *Glamour in a Glass*. Newlywed couple Jane and David travel to Belgium where he reconnects with some old associates. Jane begins to feel isolated as he accepts a private glamour commission and acts secretive. As Napoleon escapes from Elba, the pair find themselves in danger for their craft of invisibility.

A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* remarked that, despite shifts in narrative focus, "the setting and the intricate techniques of glamour manipulation continue to intrigue." In a review in *Library Journal*, Stacey Hayman suggested that readers "snuggle up in your comfiest chair," advising that "once you start reading, you won't want to stop." Reviewing the novel in *Thinking about Books*, David Marshall concluded: "*Glamour in a Glass* is a significantly better effort at developing themes outside the ambit of Austen expectations and shows an author who's prepared to take some risks to push the story outside the Regency mould. That said, I think there's still a little too much time spent on the social side of life with a lot of talking for its own sake. At the other end of the scale, work on the glamour in the glass itself and then thinking about glass-blowing technology seems slightly overdone."

Kowal published *Without a Summer* in 2013. Jane and David accept a commission in London as coldmongers, people who are able to control temperature, are being blamed for the volcanic-induced wintry weather in the warmer months of the year. Meanwhile, the pair find themselves stepping into another conflict as their client's son continues his dealings with the Luddites.

In an article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Kowal admitted that even though she works as a puppeteer, "my first love is science fiction and fantasy." Kowal revealed that she first came across the writings of Jane Austen while researching for a puppetry project. After reading through Austen's *Persuasion*, Kowal said that she "just completely fell in love with her," adding that "it remains my favorite of the Austen novels." Kowal noted of Austen that "she is so good at the small telling detail," jesting that it is "a little bit of a joke that I learned more about writing horror from Jane Austen than anyone else."

Pointing out the flaws in their relationship, a contributor to *Publishers Weekly* insisted that "readers will appreciate the realistically warm and loving romance between Jane and Vincent." In a review in *Thinking about Books*, Marshall lamented that "there's little development to the central conceit. The primary focus is romance threatened by political maneuvering. From this point of view, the second novel was far stronger with genuine innovativeness on display. Sadly, this has dropped back to a very poor standard." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor described the novel as "a creative, elegantly crafted novel that combines magical elements, historical intrigue, and both a broad and an intimate canvas of human weakness and virtue."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *America's Intelligence Wire*, February 23, 2011, "Brief: Portland Writers Are Finalists for Science Fiction Awards."
- *Booklist*, November 1, 2009, Ray Olson, review of *Scenting the Dark and Other Stories*, p. 28; August 1, 2010, Rebecca Gerber, review of *Shades of Milk and Honey*, p. 36.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, February 15, 2013, review of *Without a Summer*.
- *Library Journal*, June 15, 2010, Stacey Hayman, review of *Shades of Milk and Honey*, p. 68; February 1, 2012, Stacey Hayman, review of *Glamour in a Glass*, p. 61.
- *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 8, 2013, Jim Higgins, review of *Without a Summer*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, September 7, 2009, review of *Scenting the Dark and Other Stories*, p. 32; June 14, 2010, review of *Shades of Milk and Honey*, p. 40; September 6, 2010, review of *The Hugo Award Showcase*, p. 28; February 6, 2012, review of *Glamour in a Glass*, p. 44; February 18, 2013, review of *Without a Summer*, p. 46.
- *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 3, 2010, Michael Berry, "What's Old Is New," p. 7.

ONLINE

- *Boing Boing*, <http://boingboing.net/> (August 2, 2010), Cory Doctorow, review of *Shades of Milk and Honey*.
- *Geek Dad*, <http://www.wired.com/geekdad/> (July 8, 2010), Jenny Williams, author interview.
- *Mary Robinette Kowal Home Page*, <http://www.maryrobinettekowal.com> (January 15, 2014).
- *Thinking about Books*, <http://opionator.wordpress.com/tag/glamour/> (June 17, 2012), David Marshall, review of *Glamour in a Glass*; (June 27, 2013), David Marshall, review of *Without a Summer*.*

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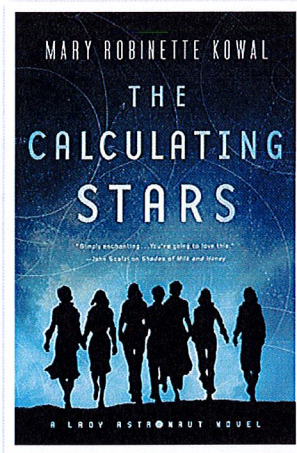
BookNAround

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Wednesday, March 13, 2019

Review and Book Club Questions: The Calculating Stars by Mary Robinette Kowal



Although I read fairly eclectically, I don't often read much in the science fiction or fantasy genres. When I do though, I tend to enjoy the books a lot. You'd think this would translate in me picking up more of them, but no. It means that people know I am reluctant with regards to the genre and only recommend I read the very best, the most thoughtful, the ones that will engage me the most even as they push my regular reading boundaries. Mary Robinette Kowal's novel *The Calculating Stars*, the first in the *Lady Astronaut* series, is one of these. Alternate history set in the 50s? Not my usual choice but it came so highly recommended that I knew I should give it a chance. Let's just say that 2 of my 3 year-round book clubs have read it now and this is very likely to be one of the three books for my summer book

club as well. I have the second novel on my shelves to read and was pleased to see that books 3 and 4 have been acquired (novelette 4.5 already exists and was, in fact, written first and won a Hugo to boot).

It's 1952 and physicist, mathematician Elma York and her engineer husband Nathaniel are on vacation in the Poconos when something catastrophic happens. Initially they think a nuclear bomb has detonated. Unable to return home to Washington DC, Elma, a former WWII pilot, flies them west to Wright-Patt Air Force base in Dayton, OH where they discover that an enormous meteorite has wiped out the entire East Coast, including the vast majority of the government as well as Elma's family. As if that's not terrible enough, the meteorite has put Earth on a collision course with an ecological disaster so vast that the need to get off this planet and find a viable way to colonize another planet before humanity's time runs out has become of utmost importance. There's no longer a race against other countries to get into space but a cooperative race for space and survival. Elma, who is incredibly brilliant and already worked for NASA before the meteorite, wants to be in the running to be an astronaut. But it's the 1950s and a woman's place is not in space, at least not according to the men around Elma, aside from her husband. As technologies are fast tracked and developed, Elma is right there in the fray. But she faces constant sexism and condescension, being metaphorically patted on the head and discounted until she is proven capable again and again.

Kowal has created a fascinating alternate history that doesn't dismiss the social issues of the 1950s but in fact highlights them in this subtly different world. Elma is a trailblazing character, one who is both impressive and strong but also fully human with weaknesses and doubts. Her push to be included, to realize her dream of being an astronaut, not only raises the question of discrimination because of gender but also finds her allied with women of color who have been doubly marginalized. Because of Elma's profession and ultimate goal to be a Lady Astronaut, there is definitely a good amount of math and science in the story but it isn't necessary to have a full understanding of either in order to enjoy the novel. The social issues and hurdles that

Pages

2019

About Me



Kristen

A voracious reader, fledgling runner, and full time kiddie chauffeur.

If anyone out there wants to send me books for review (oh please don't from me in that briar patch!), you can contact me at whitreidsmama (at) yahoo (dot) com. If you do write me there, put the blog name in the subject line or I'm liable to send the unread message to spam. My book review policy can be found [here](#).

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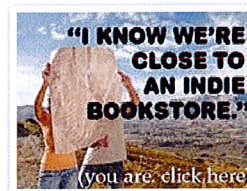


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Elma faces are really the main thrust here and they are big, complex issues indeed: sexism, racism, mental health, environmentalism. Kowal does a fantastic job raising these issues in the context of the 50s and 60s, using the attitudes of that time to showcase where we today have improved and where we haven't really come all that far. The narrative tension is not really about the outcome of Elma's quest as much as it is about the smaller, more personal pieces of her life (after all, the novelette was published first and its title gives away what has to occur in the preceding books) and it is this focus on the social and personal that makes this such a successful crossover novel. It's a well-researched and thought provoking novel and I'm looking forward to the sequel.

Here are the questions I created for one of my book clubs since I found very little online that suited my purposes. They are in no particular order, just the order they occurred to me as I leafed back through the novel. This novel is eminently discussable and although it might be out of the comfort zone of many book clubs, it raises many worthy questions and can certainly sustain a book club discussion well past that first glass of wine. Feel free to borrow these for your book club as well.

Book Club Questions by Kristen:

Kowall says: "Science fiction and fantasy takes the real world and tips it over to the side so you can see all the gaps in between." What are the ways you see this being true in this story?

Women in history have frequently been erased but books like Hidden Figures, The Radium Girls, Fly Girls, and other narrative non-fiction like them are starting to bring the amazing sidelined women back into full view. How does fiction like this also add to the narrative?

It's the coming environmental crisis that drives the push to get into space in the book but when the crisis isn't nearly as imminent as the public initially thinks, funding for space exploration and settlement could be in danger. How is this mirrored in our world today?

Elma is not only a woman but a Jewish woman and is familiar with both sexism and religious persecution as a result. Does this make it surprising how naïve she is, at least initially, about the treatment of African-Americans, from the government not evacuating survivors in largely African-American areas to the rejection of the best pilots for the astronaut program? How does she try to change her own responses to systemic prejudice?

Elma wants more than anything to have the chance to go into space and makes some pretty big sacrifices towards achieving her dream. What does she sacrifice? Are the sacrifices worth it? Have you ever made sacrifices of this magnitude in order to achieve a long-held dream?

Elma is a character of two extremes. She has crippling anxiety and panic attacks but she's also fearless enough to excel as a pilot and push against boundaries to be an astronaut. How can these two polar opposites exist so easily in one character? Do these differences make her a more human character?

Nathaniel and Elma don't have children, although there is a suggestion that they may want them at some future date. Several other of the potential "lady astronauts" do have children. In fact, one cannot continue in the training program because she's pregnant. What are the ethics involved in bringing children into a world that is set to self-destruct? Would you choose to have children in the circumstances? Why or why not?

At the end of the book, Elma discovers that her grandmother and great aunt had in fact survived the impact. Should she have searched harder for those she loved or was her lack of curiosity understandable given the widespread devastation? How does the idea of family play a part in the novel?

What does her faith mean to her, especially in the aftermath of the meteorite?

Discuss Elma's contentious relationship with Parker. Is she right to compromise with him despite his horrible misogyny?

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When Elma finally agrees to take Miltown, she keeps it a secret because she knows it could jeopardize her position in the space program. How have attitudes towards medications of this type and the conditions they treat changed over the years? Or have they stayed the same?

Elma and Nathaniel have a strong and equal marriage partnership that isn't often seen in portrayals of the 1950s and Elma is clearly no June Cleaver. How does Nathaniel's support of and belief in his wife help enable her to pursue her dreams? Does it feel realistic to you?

Posted by **Kristen** at **9:32 AM**


Labels: **book club questions**

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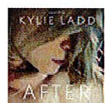
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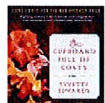
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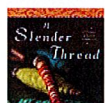
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A tale of adultery that manages to withhold judgment as it traces the impact on all four people touched by an affair, Kylie Ladd's *After*...



Review: *A Cupboard Full of Coats* by Yvette Edwards

What would you do if you opened the door to find a man you hadn't seen in 14 years standing on your doorstep, a man who disappeared from...



Review: *A Slender Thread* by Katharine Davis

I don't always come up with the proper retort when I am in a situation but I go home and perfect my rapier wit where no one can hear me ...



Reading and math logs

Just a short rant here. Do any of you with school aged children have to suffer with these odious things? I hate, hate, hate them. And I fou...

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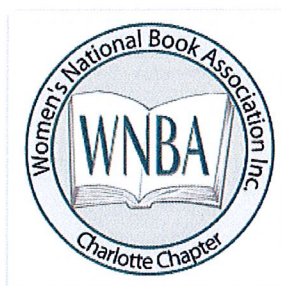


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Books read so far in 2019

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Reasons to Stay Alive by Matt Haig

The Chocolate Maker's Wife by Karen Brooks

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The Accidentals by Minrose Gwin

A London Country Diary by Tim Bradford

The Abolitionist's Daughter by Diane C. McPhail

Laurentian Divide by Sarah Stonich

No Good Asking by Fran Kimmel

Death of a Rainmaker by Laurie Lowenstein

Advanced Physical Chemistry by Susannah Nix

Moon of the Crusted Snow by Waubgeshig Rice

Ask Again, Yes by Mary Beth Keane

Decorations in a Ruined Cemetery by John Gregory Brown

Church of the Graveyard Saints by C. Joseph Greaves

The Girls at 17 Swann Street by Yara Zgheib

HUGO BOOK CLUB BLOG

Edmonton-based book club that reads and reviews new books in science fiction in an effort to contribute positively to discussions about the Hugo Award nominating and voting. The Hugo Book Club Blog was established and is maintained by Amanda Wakaruk and Olav Rokne. Most posts are co-authored by Olav and Amanda with input and/or collaboration from other book club members. Guest posts are welcome.

Saturday, 20 October 2018

The Calculating Stars — Review

In *The Calculating Stars*, Mary Robinette Kowal offers an answer to one of alternate history's most important questions: 'What if *Seventeen* was fun to read?'

While we quite enjoyed *Seventeen*, many readers described it as a bit dry.

A comparison between the two books is apt. *Seventeen* and *The Calculating Stars* are books that explore many similar ideas, but they do so in very different ways that will appeal to different people.

Both works start with a celestial catastrophe that will eventually make the planet uninhabitable and feature a re-invigorated space program that finds ways for the human race to continue without the Earth. Both works have feminist themes and both offer perspectives about how science and politics conflict.

Although *The Calculating Stars* is an alternate history in which an asteroid impact jump-starts an international space program in the early 1950s, it hews to the conventions and structures of the classic science fiction space exploration novel. This story is less about how the historical dominoes fall after a point of divergence, and more about how people work together to solve problems.

These problems range from purely technical ones, such as survival over long periods in outer space, to larger social challenges such as combating institutional racism. It is evident that Kowal has done her research on these subjects, delving into historical accounts of racially marginalized workers in the early days of the US space program.

The book's protagonist Elma York is a mathematical prodigy and pilot who fights an uphill battle to become one of the first women in space. She is a likable protagonist from a very Heinleinian model - smart, resourceful and self-effacing. Her anxiety and self-doubt may get a bit grating at times, but the author does use these character issues to make serious points about the stigmatization of mental illness.

One of the aspects of the book that is particularly strong is the supporting cast, from the primary antagonist, heroic astronaut Stetson Parker, to Elma's husband Nathaniel. It was refreshing to see a well-developed healthy romantic relationship in fiction. It was equally refreshing that every antagonist in the book was more than a one-note caricature — Parker has redeeming qualities despite his attitude towards Elma.

Mary Robinette Kowal is a clear, concise and thoughtful writer who structures her novels efficiently. The approachable writing style, enjoyable characters and straightforward narrative — not to mention the 1950s-era technological triumphalism — make the book feel like something Heinlein might have written had he been just a little more woke.

Science fiction and fantasy have seen far too many trilogies over the years where the middle volume is largely irrelevant. Thankfully, Kowal eschews this trend by telling a story in two volumes, concluding with the sequel *The Fated Sky*. The narrative leaps forward in time by several years, but the story does not suffer. In fact, one wonders how many series might have been improved by such storytelling discipline.

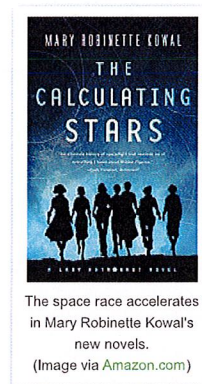
Both *Calculating Stars* and *The Fated Sky* were published in 2018, and they could be nominated for best novel in tandem with one another, much as Connie Willis' *Blackout* and *All Clear* were in 2011. But to our minds, the first of Kowal's books is the strongest, and could easily have stood on its own. From the opening pages, in which Elma and her husband face disaster, all the way through to its elegant conclusion, this is an engaging narrative.

There is a long tradition of Hugo-Award winning short works being expanded into longer works that are later shortlisted in the best novel category. It would not be surprising to see *The Calculating Stars* — which is a prequel to Kowal's Hugo-winner *Lady Astronaut of Mars* — make it to the Hugo ballot. We would be very pleased to see it there.

at [October 20, 2018](#)

Labels: [Heinlein](#), [Hugo Awards 2019](#), [Mary Robinette Kowal](#)

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Open Discussion — Worth considering for ballot in 2020?

The following list will be up the next few months as we watch, and listen to Hugo-nominees for 2020. These are

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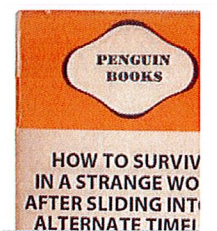
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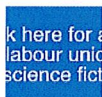
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Imagining the future of organized labour (part one of three)

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