

ContactZone

Journal of the Italian Association on Science Fiction and the Fantastic

Call for Papers

Non-Human Narrators in SF

Edited by Oriana Palusci and Valentina Romanzi

Science fiction has a strong tradition of non-human characters: alien races, sentient robots, mutant animals. They have populated the science fiction imaginary, from the most stereotypical representations of extra-terrestrial creatures as the threatening Other to the more recent “revisionist” trend that attempts to frame them as mistreated, misunderstood, or simply different. Quite tellingly, and in line with those colonial narratives that have often been linked to Golden Age SF, for a long time these non-human Others have been denied a voice and have lived under the microscope of human perceptions and prejudices.

Nevertheless, there exists a growing body of texts that displace the human perspective in favour of narrating through the eyes of a non-human entity. Notably, the tradition has been established by the novel which marks the advent of SF as a genre. Shelley’s *Frankenstein* switches narrators halfway through the story, letting the Creature recount his life and trials in first-person before returning to Victor Frankenstein’s voice. Renowned SF author Ursula K. Le Guin often framed her stories through the point of view of an alien race (think, just to mention two examples, of the chapters narrated by the Gethenian Estraven in Le Guin’s 1969 *The Left Hand of Darkness* or those following—in third person—the Athshean Selver in *The Word for World is Forest*, 1972). More recently, works like *All Systems Red* by Martha Wells (2017), *Semiosis* by Sue Burke (2018), or *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2021) feature non-human narrators such as androids or plants.

According to Bernaerts et al. (2014), the deployment of non-human narrators has several (at times overlapping) consequences: they might carry out a satirical, didactic, or ethical function, making readers reflect on the meaning of being human through a double perspective of empathy and defamiliarization. Focalizing the story through the eyes of a non-human character implies that the readers will not be able to situate conventions and patterns of narration into familiar contexts, thus putting into question the anthropocentric notions with which we tend to understand and represent reality. At the same time, a non-human narrator might actually reinforce these notions, supporting an anthropocentric worldview from a non-human perspective. Is a (narrating) non-human consciousness a bridge between humanity and other living entities or does it imply a different set of attitudes and values?

We are interested in receiving proposals that explore the narrative voices of non-human characters in science fiction. Although the topic of this call favours the written medium, we welcome abstracts that explore any form of narrative.

Possible areas of inquiry may include, but are not limited to:

- The contrastive study of first-person and third-person non-human narrators and their effects on the readers in novels, novellas, short stories, and comic books portraying a non-human narrator.
- The interplay of empathy and defamiliarization in narratives told by non-human narrators.
- The ways in which non-human narrators portray humanity.
- The ways in which non-human narrators are anthropomorphised, and the consequences this act entails.
- The way in which non-human narrators displace humanity from a privileged (not only narrative) position.
- The way in which a non-human narrator might interact with posthuman concepts.
- The effects of the use of a non-human narrator on voice/focalization.
- The ethical, didactic, or satirical dimensions of a narrative told by a non-human narrator.
- The voice of mixed races (human + non-human) in SF narratives.
- Movies, TV series, and other visual narratives told from the point of view of a non-human character.
- Video games and other interactive media featuring a non-human narrator.
- Non-human linguistic and communication systems.

Submission of abstracts:

Please send a 300-word abstract and a 100-word bio-note to valentina.romanzi92@gmail.com and aisff.starfiction@gmail.com

Relevant dates:

Deadline for abstract submissions: **15 September 2021**

Notification of acceptance: 25 September 2021

Submission of paper: **30 November 2021**

Publication of the issue: February 2022

Short bibliography:

Bernaerts, Lars et al. 2014. "The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators." *Narrative* 22/1: 68-93.

Caracciolo, Marco 2016. *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction: Explorations in Readers' Engagement with Characters*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Herman, David 2018. *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Keen, Suzanne 2007. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford UP.