

## **Amy Green's Interview with Dr. Heather Humann**

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*The 2023 recipient of the Felicia  
Campbell Innovative Contributions  
to Popular Culture Studies Award*

**Editor's Note:** I am pleased to share with our readers my interview with Dr. Heather Humann for this issue. She is the 2023 recipient of the Felicia Campbell Innovative Contributions to Popular Culture Studies Award. Her work covers a wide-ranging number of topics related to popular culture and her recent work with the concept of virtual reality and identity is especially fascinating. ~ Amy M. Green, *Editor*

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**Y**our research interests related to popular culture are diverse, as you have published in numerous areas including reality simulation, detective fiction, and the depiction of domestic violence in fiction. Why is Popular Culture Studies important to you as a scholar? How do you counter attitudes sometimes found in academia that the study of popular culture is not important?

First of all, thank you for taking the time to interview me. I am grateful for you giving me a forum to share my work. I have been—and remain—interested in a range of topics related to popular culture studies. In the case of my work on literary depictions of domestic abuse, I focused on that because of how popular culture shines a light on the persisting problem. Certainly, problems relating to domestic abuse—and society's

shifting attitudes towards violence in the home (concerns which are still being debated in legal discourse as well as in the medical and psychological communities)—get reflected in the fiction that features incidents of family violence.

In the case of my other scholarly pursuits (such as detective fiction, reality simulation, doubles, etc.), these subjects are not only interesting to me, but they tie into ongoing debates that are culturally relevant. The works I examine share in common the fact that they highlight what matters to us as a society even as they reveal ongoing debates of cultural significance.

Given all of this, I do think that popular culture studies remain quite important. While it is true that some academics suggest that popular culture does not merit scholarship—or any kind of sustained discussion in academia—I have found that their main argument (which harkens back to debates about so-called high art versus so-called low art) tends to rest on the fact that pop culture appeals to the masses and is therefore not deserving of academic consideration. Yet, I believe that it is precisely the fact that pop culture has such wide-reaching appeal that makes it relevant and worthy of critical discussion.

Popular culture calls attention to what matters to us as a society and reveals societal values and norms, even while shaping them and tracking the ways they shift over time. Not only does popular culture influence us (directly and indirectly), but it responds to social forces. In this respect, popular culture provides an important lens through which to view the challenges and concerns of a given place during a specific era.

Studying popular culture allows us to adopt a critical perspective on these issues as well as provides opportunities to

think more deeply about culture and the forces which influence it. These same reasons make the field important to me as a scholar.

**2** In your book *Another Me: The Doppelgänger in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fiction, Television and Film*, you consider that “literary treatments of the double call attention to the anxiety that has long-been associated with the figure of the double. Moreover, these stories frequently hint at what underpins this anxiety by suggesting that both fear of self and fear of death are at its root.” Can you say a bit more here about these two fears and why they manifest in this concept of the double? How do fears related to the doppelgänger differ from fears about monsters?

This is a great—and rather complicated—question. I do believe, as many other scholars have also argued, that much of the anxiety surrounding the figure of the double derives from fear of self. In the conclusion to *Another Me*, I cite an anonymous source that claims the definition of hell is when “the person you became will meet the person you could have become.” What this gets at is how we fear both our mistakes and missed opportunities. There is anxiety that surrounds not only encountering a (so-called) darker version of ourselves, but also a “better” version of what we could have become. Given these widespread fears, it makes sense that these concerns would take center stage in popular texts.

Of course, much has also been said about death being a motivator as well as a source of terror (notably, both Heidegger and Freud offer insights into our fear of death). Depictions of doubles frequently rely on these anxieties even while they reflect these widespread sentiments.

With respect to monsters (and fears about monsters), there does seem to be some overlap insofar as the fact that twins (a form of doubles) have been, at various points in history, seen as monstrous. Not only were they sometimes seen as “monstrous births,” but they highlight the erosion of clear boundaries between self and other. Until recently, of course, twins were cases of naturally occurring “doubles” (so to speak), but in the last several decades, they have emerged more frequently as a result of the many kinds of fertility treatments that are now so readily available—in fact, the so-called “IVF effect” has created a higher rate of twin births (a phenomenon I discuss in *Another Me*). Coinciding with these developments in reproductive technologies, the successful cloning of Dolly (the sheep) in the late 1990s also ushered in widespread speculation (along with a dose of anxiety) about whether the ability to clone mammals (and thus possibly human beings) might make us re-cast our assumptions about identity.

**3** In your book *Reality Simulation in Science Fiction Literature, Film and Television*, you write in reference to the film *Uncanny Valley* that it is an example of “a timeless debate about the nature of reality.” Throughout the book, you focus on the anxieties that many raise about evolving Virtual Reality (VR) technology, from authors to researchers. To what extent do you think that these anxieties relate to the possibility that some members of society will find more meaning and/or fulfillment in a virtual space than a real one? Do you think that is perceived as a threat and if so, why?

The fear certainly exists and has been the source of speculation in a lot of science fiction texts. This is the case not only in science fiction literature, but also in sci-fi films and tele-

visions shows (*Black Mirror* has addressed the concern in several of its episodes, for example). While these concerns might become relevant in the future (as the technology advances), for right now, I do not think there is much danger in virtual spaces providing significantly more fulfillment than real spaces (as the failure of the Metaverse suggests).

Nonetheless, I do see there is an ongoing erosion of the distinction between the real and the virtual. As the question mentions, I do address this topic in *Reality Simulation in Science Fiction Literature, Film, and Television*, and think that the subject deserves to be further explored, especially as we move toward a society where our presence and experiences are increasingly digitized and technologically mediated.

**4** *Reality Simulation in Science Fiction Literature, Film, and Television* presents readers with compelling and in-depth examples of how different stories have contended with virtual or simulated realities. In what ways do the particular socio-political circumstances out of which individual stories arise change over time – or do they? For example, what connects works like *The Neuromancer* (1984), *The Truman Show* (1998), and *Westworld* (2016–2022) along common themes? What might set them apart in distinct ways reflective of the time of their creation? You aren't limited, of course, to just these examples.

With the examples cited above, there are obvious and important overlaps in terms of these texts' thematic engagements with simulated reality. Moreover, these examples all probe the degree to which our concept of reality is constantly being re-written and re-imagined. That said, each of these texts make both implicit and explicit connections with the ongoing debates of their respective time periods, meaning

that *Neuromancer* provides a snapshot of the cultural concerns of the 1980s whereas *Westworld* highlights present-day concerns. Political issues and cultural preoccupations have shifted so much from 1984 (when *Neuromancer* was first published)—for example, anxieties surrounding the Cold War were still predominate in the 1980s, while the 21<sup>st</sup> century (and particularly in recent years) has been more concerned with globalization (both the challenges and opportunities it ushers in).

**5** In your book *Gender Bending Detective Fiction: A Critical Analysis of Selected Works* you include a chapter on JK Rowling's *The Silkworm* and her depiction of a transgender character in that novel. In light of Rowling's increasingly more vitriolic anti-transgender rhetoric, how does that shift how the character Pippa might be interpreted?

Yes, recent and well-publicized debates about Rowling (in particular, the allegations that she is transphobic) certainly pushes us to re-consider her depiction of Pippa. There has been a good deal of activity of Twitter and other social media outlets about the degree to which Rowling's portrayal of Pippa reveals stereotypes about nonbinary individuals.

As I suggest in *Gender Bending Detective Fiction*, surveying how gender gets depicted, concealed, criminalized, punished, and praised within detective fiction underscores shifting attitudes about not only gender but also identity and sexuality, thus marking the evolution of cultural change that has taken place since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. While *The Silkworm* (which Rowling published using the pen name Robert Galbraith) bears discussion as part of a continuum of cultural texts which reveal attitudes about gender (in particular, those

about transgender and nonbinary individuals), it needs to be assessed critically and must be considered while bearing in mind the allegations that have been made about Rowling's potentially transphobic statements.

**6** What trends do you see in detective fiction today across all storytelling formats - literature, television, film, and etc.? Are there particular points of thematic emphasis in these newer stories? Why does the detective genre continue to capture our imaginations?

I have been particularly fascinated by, and drawn to, the notion of “hybridization” as it relates to both detective fiction and storytelling in general. This trend, which is not new, but has been gaining steam, speaks to the elasticity of the genre as well as the broader tendency to mix and meld different forms together (in literature, film, television, and other modes of expression). Part of the reason that detective fiction continues to captivate is that it's so engaging and readable—the stories themselves come across as compelling and they tend to have mass appeal. Yet the genre also bears discussion for the way it brings important cultural concerns to the forefront.

**7** What research projects are you working on now?

The biggest research project that I have been working on lately is the manuscript of my fifth book, *A Tale Told by a Machine: The AI Narrator in Contemporary Science Fiction Novels* (under contract with McFarland Books). This study addresses AI narration, specifically the trend of contemporary science fiction novels relying upon the perspective of intelligent machines.

Given that narrative is more complex, and ultimately more problematic, than simply recounting events, and considering that attempts to theorize narrative often reflect deeply embedded assumptions, AI narratives test established (and taken-for-granted) frameworks. This book thus offers a re-examination of these frameworks. Additionally, this book argues that, since adopting the narrative voice of a nonhuman assumes the existence of nonhuman agency, AI narratives trouble the distinction between subject and object. In this regard, AI narratives inevitably foreground dilemmas related to identity and selfhood, concepts being reassessed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

By using selected novels as case studies, this project shows how debates about agency and subjectivity are dramatically rendered vis-à-vis their reliance on AI narrators. Thus, the examination ponders what it means to be a subject, ultimately arguing in favor of extending moral consideration to nonhumans while reaffirming the importance of (what is typically thought of as) human rights. Tied to these debates, questions arise about the nature of AI narration: What, in essence, is at stake with nonhuman narration? What are the constitutive qualities of AI narratives? What might it mean to relate to a narrator when the voice adopted is that of an AI?