

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about science fiction and other fantasy genres. I'm Eric Molinsky.

What's wrong with her? Well, what's wrong with any furtively unconventional middle-aged woman with an empty bed? And a security clearance. (FADE UNDER)

That's actor Erik Bergmann reading from, "The Women Men Don't See" by James Tiptree Jr.

In Tiptree's story, a small plane has crashes in the jungle. And at the end, aliens show up. And the protagonist is this old fashioned hero, and he tries to fight them off, until he realizes that the woman he was trying to save, engineered the plane crash so they could find the aliens.

"Take us with you. Please. We want to go with you, away from here."

"Ruth! Esteban, get that boat!" I lunge and lose my feet again. The aliens are chirruping madly behind their light.

"Please take us. We don't mind what your planet is like; we'll learn – we'll do anything! We won't cause any trouble. Please. Oh please." The skiff is drifting farther away.

"Ruth! Althea! Are you crazy? Wait –" But I can only shuffle nightmare-like in the ooze, hearing that damn voice box wheeze, "Not comemore...not come..." Althea's face turns to it, openmouthed grin.

"Yes, we understand," Ruth cries. "We don't want to come back. Please take us with you!"

James Tiptree Jr. is not well remembered today but he was a contemporary of Philip K. Dick and Ursula le Guin.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro is a writer in the Bay Area. When she was starting out, about 40 years ago, she wrote some fan mail to James Tiptree. Not only did he write her back, but he became a mentor to her.

QY: As soon as I saw an envelope with the purple ink on front, I would say, ah! It's Tip!

He used a purple typewriter ribbon, and he signed his letters to her Uncle Tip. She would send him rough drafts, saying I know there's something wrong with it. What is it? He'd write back something like:

QY: There's nothing wrong with it, you just left out the last 20%. Oh yeah! Okay, I see!

Tiptree was mysterious. He wouldn't talk on the phone or meet in person. His mailing address was in McLean, Virginia.

QY: And there's always a part of me was like, I know what's in McLean Virginia!

The CIA.

QY: And there was a joke going around amongst some of the writers about Tiptree, everyone knew it was a pen name, that was obviously from the beginning and I know a couple writers would begin notes to Tiptree by saying, Dear Dr. Kissinger!

Then one day Yarbro opened her mailbox and saw that purple typewriter ribbon.

QY: Ah! It's Tip!

But what was inside that letter was nothing she expected.

QY: I got this really chagrined letter which surprised me saying, would you be very offended if the person you've been communicating with for the last 4 years wasn't a man?

James Tiptree Jr. didn't exist. He was the pen name of a 60-year old housewife named Alice Sheldon.

QY: My answer to that was that I sent a telegram and it said, Tip's news wonderful. Now will you please call me?

So did she call you?

QY: Yeah I was about to go up to help the family trim the Christmas tree. There was a call literally going out the door, my husband went back and answered it and said it's for you, and I thought oh damn, but I went back and I got the phone and this rather low slightly gravely voice said Quinn? I said yes. She says this is your Uncle Tip. (LAUGHS)

Now the funny thing is the real life of Alice Sheldon was like something out of a novel. Her parents were explorers. I mean they used to take her on safaris in Africa. In fact, some of the animals in the Natural History Museum were shot by her parents. Her mother even wrote a children's book about their family called Alice in Jungland. Quinn Yarbrow read it when she was a kid.

QY: I did a book report on it and I said this sounds like wonderful experience to have as if you're a kid. My 4th grade teacher was very much convinced this could not have possibly have actually happened, no parents would be so irresponsible as to take their child to Africa.

JP: In some ways African exploration and those kinds of colonial narratives are forerunners of science fiction because they're about the exploring party meeting the alien and meeting the other.

Julie Philips wrote a biography called James Tiptree Jr: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon.

JP: She started reading sci-fi very early on, not only early in life but in history of sci-fi from the beginning of pulp era, reading Amazing Stories and she was reading Weird Tales and she knew more about science fiction from anybody in the field than anybody.

And having lived through it, for so many people it was a fantasy to live that kind of life.

JP: Yeah, and it was weird for her because she wasn't an active part of it, she was a kid for most of the time, it was frustrating not to play an active role, not allowed to have a gun, to be the hunting party, to be carried around to be the exotic attraction herself, she was the blonde kid who was viewed by the natives who were amazed and pulled her hair because couldn't believe it was real, so she was like a circus attraction to them.

Yeah, the spaceman who lands on the planet that's exactly how she felt, or she felt like the alien to some extent.

JP: Yeah and she came back to Chicago where she grew up and she couldn't tell anybody because nobody would understand.

Ali Sheldon grew up to have adventures of her own. She was in the OSS and then the CIA. She did field missions in Eastern Europe. Some of it was dangerous. But she was frustrated because the glass ceiling back then was not glass back then -- it was marble. Her husband – Ting was his nickname

-- Ting stayed with the CIA. She left. She decided to get a PhD in psychology, but she got bored.

JP: Just for fun late one night wrote up these sci-fi stories and sent them off to magazines and she wanted a forgettable name, she wanted a name editors wouldn't remember having rejected, obviously she intended as a big joke, she saw a jar of Tiptree jam. She said, hmmm. James Tiptree. And her husband said, James Tiptree Jr. And so she typed that name on the letter and sent the stories off. And she got these letters back saying, Mr. Tiptree we'd like to accept your story.

But hold on, why a male name?

JP: Men were the people who wrote sci-fi, there were very few women writing sci-fi in 1967, even Ursula Le Guin had been publishing maybe for 5 years. She had sent a woman's name in the 1950s that had gotten rejected, so maybe that had something to do with it.

How did it feel to be James Tiptree Jr. all the sudden? It was liberating.

JP: She was really excited to be writing to be read and to have fans but it very gradually got more and more personal, the correspondences got more personal, she cared more and more, she always pretended this was something she was doing as a joke on the side but she came to care more and more about her work. He, this voice, took over at a certain point not only the stories which I think he done from the beginning but her correspondence. And the details of her life story made more sense coming from a man than a woman. If you're talking about your experience in the army during World War II, or if you're using your inside knowledge of the CIA to construct a story, it sound much more plausible if it has a man's name on it.

QY: People assign certain kinds of expectations based on gender. They were giving HIM high points for being able to describe dangerous things well. This is really convincing stuff, this doesn't sound like someone made it up after watching a TV show. Admitting that you can have a hero that's scared was brand new territory in the whole genre.

That's interesting, I never thought was one of the groundbreaking things about her stories.

QY: Mmm hmm. At least that's what people were saying when they were first reading them, when they were first published. Of course things have changed since then and scared heroes are okay, but I think one of the reasons they are is that Tiptree wrote about scared heroes very believably.

And I would say as a man too.

QY: Mmm hmm.

Tiptree was held up as a feminist male role model.

JP: Here was this manly man who also had a sensitive side, to women for the same reason, he was a great flirt he was a man create by a woman which made him a Mr. Darcy or a Heathcliff. And everybody wanted to believe.

QY: There was a small but as some of our male colleagues, shrill feminist element in the sci-fi community back then. I think one of the things that happened you get people like Tiptree who seem to be able to straddle the fence, obvious when we found out, but it was one of those thing that kept nudging conservative types to reconsider what they had assumed about females. I mean one of the things that Heilein used to do that drove me crazy, he would make point of having A WOMAN in an important position and that was his idea of feminism this woman had no woman friends, no difference from a sidekick, nothing wrong with that but I don't believe in boy scouts with boobs, I really don't.

When I started working on podcast, reading a lot to catch up over the last 6 months. I started noticing like Rendezvous with Rama, how can Arthur C. Clare be so visionary in so many ways?

QY: And so absolutely deaf dumb and blind in so many others?

The only woman on the ship is a secretary. And there are genetically engineered chimps who have more responsibility than –

QY: Than she does. Yep. Yep.

And that jut blows my mind!

QY: And the thing of not wanting women to be in the space station because the zero gravity would be distracting because their boobs would be bouncing around? Oh come on! Get real!

Now the female characters in James Tiptree stories actually weren't that much more developed, but they always had their own agendas, even if they were often a mystery to the male protagonists -- who had one thing on their mind.

That's another reason why very few people guessed that Tiptree was actually a woman, because the author of these stories clearly knew what it was like to lust after women, even if the characters were washed up old men who could only remember nostalgically their sexual prime.

READING: Pilar of the urgently slender waist curving into her white Levi's, the shirt so softly holding swelling softness; everything so white against her golden tan, smelling of soap and flowers and girl. So clean....The pathos of her vulnerable body swells in him, he balls his fist to hide the bulge by his fly. Oh, Jeeze, I mean Jesus, let her not look, Pilar. But she does look up then, brushing her misty hair back, smiling dreamily up at him.

In Julie Philips' biography about Sheldon, she writes that Sheldon was attracted to girl from an early age. There were a few botched attempts to act on her impulses, and they were rebuked. She loved her husband. He was her rock, and he was totally cool with the whole Tiptree thing. But Julie Philips says, it just wasn't enough.

JP: I mean, that is a huge theme in her stories, the idea that your sexual feelings are not under your control and they're going to lead you to your doom really runs throughout her work, which is one of the sad things about Alice Sheldon's story is that some of the things she was expressing as Tiptree were very dark and there was real pain in her inability to be herself.

And knowing her true identity adds layers to a story like "Houston, Houston, Do You Read Me?"

READING: "Calling Major David in Sunbird?" It is the older woman, a gentle voice. "This is Luna Central. We are the service and communication facility for space flight now. We're sorry to have tell you that there is no space centre at Houston anymore. Houston itself was abandoned when the shuttle base moved to White Sands, over two centuries ago."

A group of male astronauts discover they're not just off course, they somehow gone through a wormhole or something and ended up hundreds of years in the future. A ship full of women rescues them. At first, the guys think this is like a fantasy come true.

READING: Bud is grining broadly, they all are. "Cavemen," he chuckles. "All the chicks land preggers."

Eventually they discover that men on Earth were wiped out by a plague. The female human race has been reproducing by cloning. And the women on this ship actually don't have no plans to bring these 20th century specimens back to Earth.

“I’m a man. By god, yes, I’m angry. I have a right. We gave you all this, we made it all. We built your precious civilization and your knowledge and comfort and medicines and your dreams. All of it. We protected you. We worked our balls off keeping you and your kids. It was hard. It was a fight, a bloody fight all the way. Were tough. We had to be, can’t you understand? Can you for Christ’s sake understand that?”

Another silence.

“We’re trying,” Lady Blue sighs. “We are trying, Dr. Lorimar. Of course we enjoy your inventions and we do appreciate your evolutionary role. But you must see there’s a problem. As I understand it, what you protected people from was largely other males, wasn’t it? We’ve just had an extraordinary demonstration in that. You have brought history to life for us.” Her wrinkled brown eyes smile at him; a small tea-colored matron holding an obsolete artifact.

“But the fighting is long over. It ended when you did, I believe. We can hardly turn you loose on Earth, and we simply have no facilities for people with your emotional problems.”

“Besides, we don’t think you’d be very happy,” Judy Dakar adds earnestly.

By the mid ‘70s, Alice Sheldon was growing discontent. She felt like Tiptree was having all the fun and she was living this stifling life in the suburbs. Then in 1976, she was officially outed by one her fans, a guy named Jeff Smith.

JP: Tiptree has been talking about his mother, he’s an only child his mother is very old, and very ill and he’s going through terrible exhausting thing of having to care for his mother, and finally his mother dies and he tells a couple friends, including Jeff Smith, who decides to go and look up obituary in the Chicago Tribute, he knows enough details that he thinks he can figure it out, he thought he would just find out Tiptree’s real male name and then he could keep it to himself, but finds the obituary there’s an only child listed but it’s a daughter. He’s so surprised that he writes to Tiptree and hey is it true your name is really Alice Sheldon?

Again, here’s Quinn Yarbro.

QY: One of the things I told her when we were in vocal contact, she had expected people to be angry with it, apparently because she got away with it. I said I was disappointed on two points. One of them is you didn’t know me better than that after all this correspondence and I’ve been taking a certain amount of

solace when our male colleagues drive me nuts, at least Tip understands and now I know why.

But she says there was a subtle backlash.

QY: She was now no longer one of the gang. She was one of them.

Of them?

QY: Them. Women.

Ah.

QY: The gang being the boys.

Right, right.

QY: All the sudden there were deprecating remarks not open criticism, of course Tiptree would write that kind of a story. Now that you know Tiptree is she that doesn't suddenly change quality of a story and the fact that this only kind of story she can write, it was blatantly obviously because there was this rubble heap of published stuff and you could say, oh yeah, it all works. I'm still staggered when I think about some of the stuff the more -- how to put this? -- reactionary fans who just had to dismiss everything that came after.

Alice Sheldon had wanted to come out for a while but once she was exposed, her writing became more cautious and less experimental. And she discovered that this fake persona was really an excuse to do what she already wanted to do, which was to be a recluse.

In Julie Philip's book, she prints these heartbreaking exchange of letters between the late writer Joanna Russ and Alice Sheldon. And in the letters, Russ admits that she was in love with James Tiptree and therefore is in love with Alice Sheldon. And she encourages Sheldon to ditch the husband and move to a lesbian commune. But Sheldon writes back and says that she's too old, too set in her ways to change. She talked about suicide for about ten years. And the her husband became ill.

JP: He's 84, he's nearly blind, she's needing more and more care, she's not capable of providing that care, she's more depressed, she doesn't want to live after he dies, so she got him to agree to a suicide pact so she shot him and she shot himself. And it's a little unclear in the book whether he agreed to the pact or not. But I actually think that he did.

How would he not agree to it, did she just shoot him?

JP: That is one interpretation of what happened she decided to shoot him but I think he wasn't particularly happy but he could see the point, he was not going to live much longer.

QY: She had said every one when she was my Uncle Tip and I assumed he was talking about a wife rather than the other way around and said because of what they had gone through during the war, if they reached a point when they couldn't live together they would die together, and when I found out I thought well they're just keeping the bargain.

So you were surprised but not shocked?

QY: Yeah I was surprised and sadden but I wasn't floored and how the hell could that possibly happen? None of that. In fact it seemed to be of a piece of the way that she related to the world.

The most surprising thing to me about James Tiptree or Alice Sheldon is that I never heard of either of them. She's still a legend in the sci-fi community – there's an award named after -- well, actually it's named after Tiptree. But it is an award of writers that deal with gender in interesting ways.

I have to wonder what if Tiptree really were a man – would there have been film adaptations? Would there have been film adaptations like Philip K. Dick?

And this story is so relevant today. I mean there was a writer named Joanne Rowling who was told by her publishers that she couldn't use her own name to sell her book about a boy wizard. She had to change it to JK Rowling. And I keep reading stories about women on Twitter who change their avatars to a man to see if people treat them differently – and they sure do.

JP: So you're looking at how, clearly how being a man shaped her identity this is what you're really interested in.

I guess so, as a man I feel like – she – uh, I guess so but you feel like Tiptree was just a name, that she was Ali writing those stories, those letters that Tiptree not so much of a muse?

JP: Yeah, no I think that Tiptree gave her access to parts of herself that she didn't have access to as Ali Sheldon that he allowed her to express parts of herself – I mean it's all her, it's always all you, you're never completely pretending to be someone else, you have to fill it in with bits of your own psyche,

bits of her own psyche which she didn't have enough access to as a woman and to which she did have access as a man.

Yeah.

JP: And I would like to ask you as a man whose read the stories whose read about her life, what is the appeal of this woman writer to men or do you hear the masculine voice do you feel this is a voice speaking to you as a man among men?

I do, I think that's what struck me so much was that how she's able to jump back and forth, as you say in her book, a lot of men feel like she gets men in a way that she never intended to, she was just writing herself.

JP: Oh I don't know, she had done a lot of observing men over the years, I think she had a few things to say about men and what it was like to be a man.

But it sounds like to be more modern in thinking that gender is fluid, rather than say oh my God she was this and she pretended to be this – she was all.

JP: Well, that's what I was saying about self-creation, she was defying the categories and questioning all the categories in wonderful ways.

Yeah,

JP: And obviously that is something that appeals to men too that men find that really liberating to see those categories called into question in the same way that women do.

So maybe I'm just as guilty of putting her in binary boxes. Maybe the generation that's going to truly embrace Alice Sheldon hasn't come of age yet. Or to put a sci-fi spin on it, maybe they aren't even born.

That's it for today's show. Thanks for listening. Special thanks to Julie Philips, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and Erik Bergmann. You can like the show on Facebook or leave a comment in iTunes, that would be great. I tweet at emolinsky. The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.