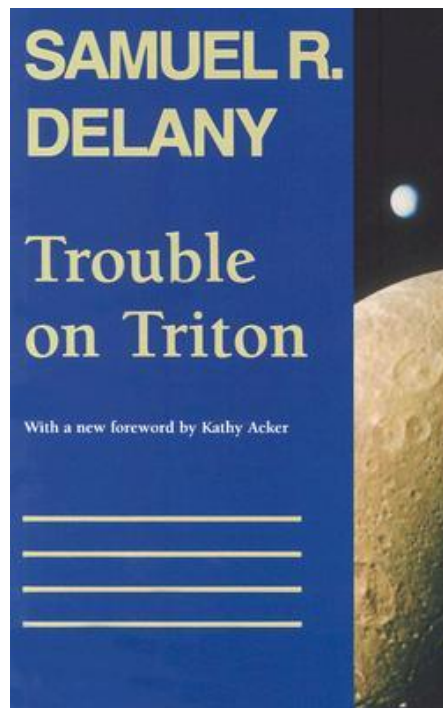




Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia

Samuel R. Delany , Kathy Acker (Foreword)

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In a story as exciting as any science fiction adventure written, Samuel R. Delany's 1976 SF novel, originally published as Triton, takes us on a tour of a utopian society at war with . . . our own Earth! High wit in this future comedy of manners allows Delany to question gender roles and sexual expectations at a level that, 20 years after it was written, still make it a coruscating portrait of the happily reasonable man, Bron Helstrom -- an immigrant to the embattled world of Triton, whose troubles become more and more complex, till there is nothing left for him to do but become a woman. Against a background of high adventure, this minuet of a novel dances from the farthest limits of the solar system to Earth's own Outer Mongolia. Alternately funny and moving, it is a wide-ranging tale in which character after character turns out not to be what he -- or she -- seems.

Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia Details

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Yupa says

Delany, l'autore, è un personaggio atipico, ancor più in passato che oggi: afroamericano, bisessuale, sperimentatore di stupefacenti, scrittore di fantascienza...

Triton, invece, è già più tipico per l'anno in cui vede la luce, il 1976.

Come molta altra fantascienza proietta in linea retta alcune tendenze di frangia del suo tempo, chiedendosi cosa succederebbe se in futuro diventassero dominanti.

La società dei satelliti, cui appartiene la comunità umana su Tritone, potremmo definirla anarco-socialista o, se vogliamo, socialista-libertaria.

Non presenta grossi problemi di penuria materiale ma, soprattutto, qualunque scelta individuale è permessa da un'avanzata tecnologia e tollerata da una società più che aperta: è dato spazio a ogni tipo di sessualità; ognuno può dare sfogo alla sua fantasia nel vestirsi (o svestirsi) come preferisce, nel privato come in pubblico; ci sono gruppi religiosi d'ogni tipo, comprendenti anche forme d'ascesi estrema, sino all'automutilazione del corpo e della mente.

È accettato che ognuno conduca la propria vita lungo qualunque percorso di scelte, e facendo del proprio corpo un campo di sperimentazione non vincolato da leggi pubbliche o da una morale collettiva; senza che nessuno rompa le scatole con le classiche scuse che determinate pratiche sono da punire/vietare/biasimare perché pericolose, di cattivo gusto o sintomo di follia.

(nota bene: altri autori (molti!) avrebbero usato la stessa identica materia per lanciare strali sull'edonismo come decadenza e sulla tecnologia come subdola schiavitù; non Delany, per fortuna)

Il contrasto è forte col passato: nel 2112 su Tritone i drammi teatrali del XX secolo e precedenti sono di difficile comprensione, perché basati principalmente sulla gelosia, sentimento a quanto pare ignoto in questo futuro.

Ma il contrasto è forte anche con Terra e Marte, rimasti ancora piuttosto simili al nostro presente.

Par di capire che Marte sia una ginocrazia e Terra ancora un'androcrazia: se sulla Terra la prostituzione femminile è lecita e quella maschile vietata, su Marte è il contrario.

E par di capire che per l'autore entrambe i mondi non siano il massimo: che comandino le donne o gli uomini, poco cambia finché c'è qualcuno che comanda e una morale collettiva (maschilista o femminista che sia) a dettare le condotte.

Notevole l'arretrato pianeta Terra visto con gli occhi del protagonista appena giunto da Tritone: è la nostra normalità raccontata da una prospettiva straniera. Sulla Terra il protagonista nota che esistono "modelli di base" d'abbigliamento a distinguere in quattro categorie uomini, donne, giovani e lavoratori; rimane sconvolto per la brutalità della polizia, che osa arrestarlo e interrogarlo con metodi spicci; non gli sfugge che "l'unica droga disponibile è l'alcool"; e infine mette in discussione il sistema terrestre di assistenza sociale, elefantiaco e inefficiente, lontano dalla semplice razionalità dei servizi su Tritone.

Ma se l'autore sembra avere più simpatia per la società tritoniana anarchica e socialista, il protagonista, ex prostituito proveniente da Marte, resta spaccato in due tra la vecchia casa e la nuova, incapace di entrare del tutto in sintonia con gli umani del satellite di Nettuno; tanto da interrogarsi se in passato, quando donne e uomini avevano i loro ruoli, le cose non fossero più facili, se non per tutti almeno per lui.

Una società come quella di Tritone, aperta all'integrazione di qualunque scelta individuale, può riuscire a integrare chi invece provenga da un retroterra assai simile al nostro presente, in cui la norma è contestare le scelte individuali altrui?

E purtroppo...

Purtroppo la materia di base del romanzo, feconda e stimolante, fatica a svilupparsi nelle mani del suo

autore.

Duole dirlo, ma la scrittura di Delany è al solito difficile: il ritmo è sincopato, la trama sfuggente, la narrazione ostica, e le frequenti digressioni non aiutano, anzi, aumentano la cripticità di numerosi passaggi e degli intenti generali.

In un libro come *Dhalgren*, che esplicitamente "non è lì per essere capito", la cosa può essere accettata, se non benvenuta. Difficile essere altrettanto accomodanti leggendo *Triton*.

Delany ha tante cose interessanti da dire (tantissime), ma sembra poco propenso a porgerle in maniera agevole al lettore.

E tuttavia, almeno personalmente, continua a intrigarmi. Leggerò ancora altro di suo. Magari non a breve, ecco.

Leo Robertson says

I suspect I'm not clever enough for it- but, you know, I hear *Dhalgren* is very clever, but similar to this (I remembered while reading it) I thought pockets of its description and arguments were interesting and highly original, but the rest was bland- and I'm always in a state of perpetual unease about who's going to sleep with whom and what I'm supposed to think of it, even although I'm not engaged in the lives of any of the characters... perhaps the underlying structure of either book is fascinating and rich and genius and masterful, but I don't care to dig deep in frozen soil.

And I don't know if this counts as narrow-mindedness, but I like men, not women, and I don't consider any kind of future where everyone's asking everyone to frick, then everyone fricking each other and then they both change gender and frick again, that sounds like an identity-seeking nightmare to me more than a utopia. It took thirteen year-old me so much effort to get to the point where he was able to identify as gay that, now twice the age, I'm fairly sure I don't have the energy to identify or even to try anything else (I'm married anyways- so fuck, Delany, call me traditional!). Even fictionally, it's exhausting to keep track of.

I'm seeing more and more that my perception of what is a novel and what isn't is much more limited than I expected- I think this is a response to reading the beautiful crafts that can come from writing like a tennis player with the net taut, rather than have it sagging and letting all kinds of balls get past- and long, oblique philosophical discussions- that only happen to take place on other planets or moons for reasons unclear- neither seems to me to be a novel, nor really sci-fi.

Still, Delany is capable of greatness, and when I'm feeling more adventurous, I'll return to his intellectual-ethno-sexual ballpits again :)

Dan says

Triton is one of those books that lingers in the penumbra at the edges of my understanding like a jungle cat stalking prey, carefully choosing the perfect moment to pounce. And yet (and yet) I couldn't put it down. Delany's prose is irresistible and his ideas are tantalizing (even if I'm not entirely sure I walked away with a clear understanding). *Triton* is also an example of a particular type of sci-fi that skips past the distraction of identity politics such as race, gender, and sexuality to get at larger issues, which is not to say these things aren't discussed. Quite the contrary. In fact, the main thing that's widely known, relatively speaking, about this book is how the protagonist switches gender and sexuality. Rather, what I mean is that these categories that are so often divisive today cease to have the same impact in and of themselves in the larger world of the novel.

A post-identity politics is by no means a Utopia, nor is Delany interested in crafting a portrait of a would-be Utopia. He calls the novel a Heterotopia, which is a term from Foucault that describes a space of otherness that, in part, functions to allow a Utopia elsewhere. That's where Delany's real interest lies: in the space of otherness. Neptune's moon Triton is that space in the novel. It's a place of radical individuality where nearly anything is permissible (and in the "unlicensed sector" whatever scant regulations do exist are waived). The basic needs of all residents are met and people can choose to work (or not) to earn more credits if they're interested in elevating their standard of living. But while Triton and the other outer satellites presumably play a vital role as Heterotopia for Terran and Martian societies (though the novel briefly visits Earth and it's hardly a Utopia) they remain targets for a cataclysmic war raging across the solar system. We're never told the reason for the war, only that Triton has managed to stay out of it (for now). Delany uses the tension of the war to propel the plot forward, but that's not really the focus. He's more interested in examining erudite ideas, like metalogic.

Brom Helstrom, the novel's protagonist, struggles to find happiness amid a backdrop of war and identity fluidity. He spends his days playing board games and philosophizing with his co-op neighbors, and earns extra credits working as a metalogics specialist in the hegemony. "Metalogic" being defined at one point early on in a manner that went largely over my head. What I gleaned, however, was that humans rarely employ pure logic, rather we rely on shifting parameters within discourse to approximate logic for any given circumstance (to say that the Taj Mahal is white is, in pure logic, to deny that it is any other color. But what is the Taj Mahal? Is it the building alone or also the grounds, with its green grass and blue water and yellow sand, etc. And if it's just the building then what of the shades of brown in the grout, or the veins of various colors in the marble, etc?). Delany is stabbing right at the heart of narrative here. *Triton* is a book about reading, about knowledge, or, more broadly, human discourse, and in that way it ties in nicely with the surface plot. What is a Utopia (or a Heterotopia) without its "other," and where is the distinction between the two drawn? When Bron's friend Sam reveals he used to be a different race, gender, and sexuality (and when Bron himself undergoes a similar transformation), Delany is offering a radical (perhaps more so in the '70s when the novel was published than today) vision of personal freedom, but he's also gesturing at the fragile nature of social, historic, political, etc. discourses, which are held together like a complicated web of tension rods, each balanced by the others in a stable metalogical way. A place like Triton where nothing is immutable of course will represent a danger to that balance. And so the war between the planets and the satellites rages. And so Bron's affections continue to orbit the mercurial actress known as "the Spike."

I think I'll return to this book down the line. A single read is far from sufficient.

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David Gillette says

I read this book as "Triton," in a yellowed 1978 Frederik Pohl Selection mass-market paperback edition. Someone stamped it with their name, and Delany signed it, inside, twice, to that reader, exciting me enormously when I found a copy in Second Story. I'd wanted to read it for a while, because it's one of those postmodern libertarian utopias that SF writers occasionally turn out. A lot of important people have written their versions of The Good Society; Heinlein has "The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress" (to which "Triton" responds interestingly) and (to an extent, arguably) "Starship Troopers" (mentioned in the ancillary materials to my version of the text); Le Guin has (primarily) "The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia" (see above) and "Always Coming Home." Ken MacLeod did four very interesting books on the topic (the Fall Revolution series, each installment on a different kind of libertarian society). Kim Stanley Robinson also did a multiple-variants series of utopias/dystopias, with the Three Californias books, and of course the Mars trilogy is a great big excruciatingly worked out hopeful story of human possibilities. I'm told his recent

"2312" has bits of that too. Oh, and Terry Bisson has a book where the Civil War happens differently, and better, called "Fire on the Mountain."

I like a lot of these books. I like the rigors of the American pulp SF idiom (hereafter designated "SF"), that Gernsback-Campbell-Sturgeon narrative formula, brought to bear by someone with a social conscience, or at least some ideals, some narrative that they're willing to live for. SF is sometimes seen as apart from utopia/dystopia: the idea being to show the world getting in some ways better, in some ways worse, as technology develops or we encounter aliens or whatever. Whereas a utopia is a story that's supposed to provide a blueprint, and a dystopia is sort of a scurrilous attack on one's political opponents. But obviously SF carries a lot of . . . notions; I still find myself genuinely challenged and interested by Heinlein's better semi-utopias (basically the ones mentioned above -- I hear "Farnham's Freehold" is basically a racist tract, though), and Charles Stross has recently put out the notion that SF became a kind of default propaganda organ for ideological technocracy, even as those ideas fell out of mainstream political discourse in the chaos of the 1940s. I enjoy SF's suspicion of utopia: it reminds me of the older anarchist suspicion of utopia (although Dejacque wrote "L'Humanisphere," so it's not like anarchists were above practicing the form). And, sure enough, there is plenty of anarchist or anarchist-inflected SF. Almost all of the writers I've listed tend to incorporate at least a strongly civil-libertarian current into their presentation of the Good Society, and most present societies developing without or beyond states. (On the other side of the split in the First International: Delany has spoken in interviews about the Foundation trilogy being sort of historical-materialist, and I think that can be extended to SF more generally: other than Karl Marx, what non-SF writers dealt seriously with technological change and society?)

"Triton" isn't really set in an anarchist society. It might be, arguably, panarchist. Sexual freedom and sexual safety are probably its main selling points to readers today. It has a class structure of sorts, with credit ratings and bosses. There's a war, a terrible one that kills millions, although, conveniently, not really any of the major characters. Mainly it's seen from the American point of view, as casualties racked up from afar, a war fought with buttons and machines. (There's a recurring joke in the book about the cliché being that "at least nobody's using soldiers," when the mechanization of war has made the practice at last entirely a matter of murdering civilians.) There is tension with regards to immigration to the outer moons from the inner worlds of the Solar System, and that may or may not frame the action -- the reader isn't really given enough on the topic to decide. I think this lack of reference is Delany commenting on the experience of oppressed people before there's an ideological framework for them to conceptualize their oppression (I say that because I've read him talking about the freedom movement and its later shift from using the term "Negroes" to using the term "black people," and I know that he's gay and has talked about queer people not seeing themselves as a community pre-Stonewall, so it's something he's lived through a couple of times); I think that part of the point of this tendency in the book is that without a way of understanding what's happening, one always has to wonder: is it me? Is it my fault I'm not happy in this society?

Bron Helstrom, of course, isn't happy in his extremely understanding, open society. He is a fabulous portrait of a twentieth-century misogynist, and he certainly seems to be racist too. Delany writes the word "nigger" a few times in this book, mainly w/r/t Bron's attitudes toward a black man named Sam, who was born a white woman, and who occupies a position of governmental authority, and is remarkably competent, and ends up delivering a lot of extremely good exposition. The book doesn't, so far as I can tell, give us much on the racial dynamics of the society; one imagines they're different, given that people can present as any race they wish at almost any time with freely available outpatient cosmetic surgery, but there's apparently still a current of racism present . . . in the appendices, it's mentioned that the language these characters speak is some mixture of Hungarian and Cantonese. What's the term that Delany is "translating" from, then? Or is Bron using an English loan-word? Fascinating stuff. Delany is really fucking good at his job. The most sustained stuff has to do with gender, sex, and sexism, though, and the book really shines in its sensitive, understanding, and utterly effective attack on a bunch of trends in misogynist behavior that are painfully visible today, particularly on the internet.

Actually there's a whole lot of spectacularly effective prediction in "Triton": Facebook stalking, for example. Also the ubiquitous surveillance. When it was written, I believe the intention was to throw the reader into perceiving a very repressive government: they have everything on their citizens! To the point that now you can watch five minutes of yourself on camera going about your business in the booths they've set up in the street! And then later the reader would have that attitude complicated, and would come to see profound good things about the society. Now that we live in a society where the government and non-governmental state organizations (corporations of one kind or another) actually do have huge amounts of our information, the effect is rather spoiled, but it is delightful and fascinating, particularly the way Delany admits the possibility of a Stasi-like surveillance state that would tolerate the dissent that leads to the establishment of the booths. Which is rather like our own condition today, except that the government would never be so responsive.

If there's a problem, I think that it's in the goodness of the people around Bron. Maybe that's a consequence of the Good Society. Bron wishes he could live in a closed, misogynist patriarchy, so that he could be served by a woman in the way he would like to be served. His friend Lawrence points out that if his desires were just for sexual domination, he would have no problem: it's the emotional domination he's starving for. It's a fascinating idea: what if, for a few people, it's not social conditioning, but real need that drives them toward oppressive relationships? (Although maybe it is social conditioning, since Bron is from Mars, not Triton: like I said, we can't quite tell.) Lawrence, Sam, and the Spike, though, are all there for him, even when he's being truly terrible. In the end, admittedly, he loses all of them, but they give him an awful lot of leeway, explaining to him precisely what's happening, offering him options. Lawrence and Sam particularly have a sense of social responsibility and historical perspective that may occasionally seem a bit false . . . although I've met people like that. Maybe a utopia turns up more of them. The Spike is mainly a pleasant cipher, partially because of the limited third-person: we can see when Bron is twisting logic and memory and gaslighting crudely, but, probably because we're seeing her through his eyes, we don't really get much of her as a person. Which is too bad. Bron, though, is an astounding creation: he's so awful, but I found myself empathizing, at times, even as Delany dissected him. Clearly, SRD has listened, really listened, to these people. This book is a superb handbook to a certain type of psyche.

Bron's reliance on a certain kind of rationality is also excellently skewered, through the fictional metalogic (a nice complement to Asimov's psychohistory, really); it's a great way to show that certain type of misogynist "rationality" for the spectacularly irrational tripe that it is. That's my favorite thing about this book: it demonstrates hypocrisy as well as does, say, Orwell in "Homage to Catalonia," although much more sympathetically. I can't say I entirely followed the revelations about the Spike's relationship with Ashima Slade . . . perhaps on another pass. The idea bits of the book are delightful; one of the best things in SF is the drop-into-a-fascinating-essay, and Delany is a genius, so you can just sit back and be dazzled. He also integrates those ideas with the psychology of his protagonist much better than most writers, which is interesting, because he's presenting a person whose ideas haven't really been shaped by his society (or so it seems), in a reverse of what SF usually does. The book has so little of the usual SF action-plot, too, that it's a relief: this book manages as a character study, with a pleasantly 19th-century attention to the protagonist's economic circumstances and place in history. The prose, too, is the real deal: from the pleasant apothegms, like (roughly) "bravery is just making a big deal about doing what's best for the largest number of people" to the food descriptions to the, well, the Spike's letter is dazzling and funny and heartbreaking (and predicts voice-to-text and maybe autocorrect), and there are descriptive sentences that are just brilliant.

I didn't see as much of "The Dispossessed" as others have in "Triton": there's the trip to the Bad Society, with Bron's truly disturbing encounter with the cops. I was more struck by the "Moon Is a Harsh Mistress" resonances, especially the really horrifying devastation of Earth (contrasted with Delany's defense of the pro-war sentiments of Heinlein's "Starship Troopers" in the work notes: really interesting).

The whole book is extremely, extremely enjoyable, shot through with a warmth and humanity that keeps the humor from getting too Evelyn Waugh, an bracing intelligence, a vast insight. Probably my favorite thing I've read by Delany, and I love Delany. I am immensely impressed.

Jason says

Not as good as Dhalgren, but maintained my impression of Delaney as an author working beyond his pigeon-holed genre. In each of his books I've read he seems more concerned with the relationship between reality and art than with the technicalities of "hard sci-fi." Not that he doesn't fully embrace the genre--this book is most definitely science fiction with its share of technical flamboyance--but I feel that is only his platform to attack greater issues.

I'm not sure what I think about his representation of the differences between the sexes in this book. The description of the book is maybe one of the most misleading I've ever seen. Sure, the action takes place amidst a war, but the majority of the book was about love and art, and the final quarter is solely about postmodern gender differences. The description is an excellent example of the publishing industry forcing authors into their marketable subtypes--sci-fi nerds would not be as likely to pick this up if the description were more accurate. I'm interested to hear the opinion of a female reader, unfortunately I don't know many who would pick up anything vaguely resembling science fiction...

Rhys says

Delany is one of my favourite writers, but it has taken me a long time to get round to reading this one. In fact, *Triton* has been on my bookshelves since 1993. I think I was intimidated by the appendix on metalogic. It looks like a 'difficult' novel, but that's really an illusion. It's a beautifully written, complex but totally accessible and engaging work.

The main character, Bron Helstrom, is simultaneously likeable and infuriating, perceptive and unaware, an authentic personality on the page. The background events of his life in an 'ambiguous heteropotia' include a devastating war between the inner worlds and the outer satellites that is presented slightly obliquely and very convincingly. And the society in which Bron has chosen to make his home is constructed with brilliant imagination and attention to detail. It's a sort of utopia-of-choice, not quite the perfect society but hugely preferable to our own.

Delany is a thought-provoking writer but there is a lot of positive emotional energy in his work too. *Triton* is the best novel I have read all year. Without question.

Steve says

Triton! This was one of the more fun and "mainstream" Delany novels I've come across. I couldn't help but imagine the cathartic enjoyment he experienced while writing the long-suffering Bron. That character truly captures the Ta-Nehisi Coates definition of whiteness decades before Coates spelled it out in "Between the World and Me". I thought it was a pretty provocative stance for a mid 70s novel, and definitely one worth sharing. At the same time, the book has the feel of a classic sci-fi novel, and I think would be equally enjoyed by both readers of mainstream sci-fi with rockets and space colonization and readers looking for a bit more social commentary than the norm. Give it a shot if you're looking for an entry point to Delany's full length works.

To give a bit more color on the "whiteness" comment above: I'm not strictly talking about skin color, I'm talking more about a mindset. It's the state of being so used to getting what you want that you're surprised when something doesn't go your way and you rarely, if ever, consider how entitled you are. Everyone who lives on Triton is by this definition "white"; it's a utopia so I suppose everything should be tailored to suit your needs. But some things cannot be given to you by external forces alone, and Bron really struggles to understand that purpose isn't bestowed to you by another, it must be built up from within. Reading through his struggles is something like watching a car crash in slow motion, but at least no one real got hurt.

El says

I feel like of all the books that made up Radical Utopias, this one took the longest for me to read. I don't know if that's realistic or not, but it was definitely the longest, and at times, driest. Which is hard to admit since I felt the first book in the anthology, *Walk to the End of the World*, was plenty dry.

I read Dhalgren a few years ago and it blew my mind. I have slowly been collecting Delany's novels, but went through the process realizing his other books might not touch me as deeply. Now that I've read *Triton* (later published as *Trouble on Triton*), I see that I was correct.

There are some connections to Dhalgren, primarily in that the protagonist here, Bron, used to leave in a Martian city, Bellona, which is where Dhalgren took place. It almost makes me want to re-read Dhalgren, but I'm so worried I won't like it upon a second reading that I probably will never do that. I understand there are some elements here connected to other Delany books, so I look forward to making my way through them all since I love shit like that (if done well).

The particular utopia indicated here takes place on Triton, or Neptune's moon. Bron came from Mars, and Triton is... different. And Bron spends a lot of his time kind of dealing with that and basically having really shitty relationships with other people because Bron has no social skills.

There are some interesting elements to this utopia, such as technology has provided that folks can change ones gender and sexual orientation at will. In that sense I was reminded of the second book in this anthology, *The Female Man*, though I felt Joanna Russ wrote a more compelling and influential story along those lines.

This is science fiction, and as I find with a lot of traditional science fiction (what I think real readers call "hard sci-fi") is that so much of it is boring to me. It's just not my preference, though I know many people who would be more into that than myself. I was there for the utopia, and it was fine. Bron is sort of a dick, which doesn't necessarily make the book itself bad, but makes me wonder what Delany's point was in writing Bron. There's discussion somewhere towards the end of the book about women, and perceptions of them, and it made me a little grumpy. I feel Delany is in a pretty good position to write about minorities as he is an African-American gay man, but at least in 1976 when *Triton* was first published, I'm not sure I felt confident that he viewed women very highly.

This could entirely be my faulty reading of the story, and I do agree that Delany's characterizations in this book were lacking across the board.

Fun fact: At the end of the novel are a couple appendices that seem sort of a strange inclusion. But apparently they come up later as well which come up later in his *Nevèryon* series, so I look forward to seeing that as well as any other connections.

I really want to like Delany, but so far Dhalgren is the best I've read. I'll be curious to see how his other

books work for me.

M. says

I taught this novel for a course in Queer and Trans Lit this semester -- it's a thick novel as all of Delany's are, thick with social observations and insights, and was challenging for some students, esp those who haven't read much sf; nonetheless it spurred terrific convos, especially in relation to Giovanni's Room (both novels interrogate toxic white masculinity) and Orlando (ie. thinking about the possibilities sff affords for thinking through power and oppression, esp i/r/t gender and sexuality), two other novels we've read this semester. The representation of trans experience is somewhat limited, as Bron's gender transition is mainly a tool for exploring gender binaries and Bron's own residual, embarrassing misogyny in the queer feminist world of Triton; still extraordinarily complex and sympathetic: to women and feminism, and to gender and sexual pluralism.

Matus says

On the surface, a fun story about a future civilization with some of our social kinks worked out (or at least, strongly reacted to), told with the usual variety and flair Delany cooks up. Deeper down, I think it's really a character study.

The supremely odd thing with this book is that the main character (narrator) is a really, really terrible person. Specifically they are selfish, lie to others and themselves (alter reality for their pride & general benefit), and are even borderline malicious. It's really hard to read what is going through their head, and how they react to some situations. Meanwhile what makes the story engaging are all the amazing people around. Some of them are initially viewed highly by the narrator, but as you see the narrator's opinions swing on even those people, you start to realize that maybe everyone in the book is pretty awesome, and the narrator is just completely unreliable. (Maybe the clearest example is how Sam is introduced?) Anyway so it's interesting seeing the world through this super fractured lens, and also makes you wonder about yourself.

Back to the social side; Delany balances his sci-fi-y stuff with his usual desire to cook up progressive, liberal, bizarre societies. In the setting of the book, mars and especially earth are very conservative; meanwhile, everything farther out (referred to as 'the satellites'), thanks to being new, is very progressive (and Delany manages to inject lots of weirdness). As an example, there are interesting sub-narratives on gender issues, using the planets and the satellites to clarify contrasts (also "e-girls"? "footmen"/"waitresses"?). For a particularly nice bit on this, without giving much away, check out the narrator's view on women at the end of the book, and specifically how their psychologist (also mars emigrated!) explains it.

I think it must have been challenging to write a book with such a messed up narrator. It is amazing that Delany manages to give the reader guideposts with which to actually measure reality, but without clearly discrediting the narrator. It's just there for you to find. Though I should say, it gets more obvious as the story progresses, to put it mildly.

(Miscellaneous nonsense comments. Delany's use of racial and sexual slurs which, uh, target his own real life demographic, is kindof hilarious. Anyway, I want to give this book 5 stars, but the narrator is really so terrible that you feel miserable reading some parts (it's so convincing that you think "this book is bad" not "this person is bad"). Maybe that is the WHOLE POINT and this book deserves 500 stars. So okay, 5 stars it

is. You win, Samuel Delany. (Also, you may say "samuel shortens to sam and both are black, whoa", but wait 'til you read about Sam's origins..))

Jeanne Thornton says

(spoilerrzzz)

I feel very weird about this book! I love a lot of it, but in the end it felt just too terrible to spend this much time with bron--i kind of would have been elated with the book just ending after the spike's letter arrives and a Big Event happens in the war? the subsequent gender stuff is very gratifying to me on one level and very depressing on another: i appreciate that pains were taken to establish that bron's Gender Journey is not typical, but that also kind of grosses me out. and I feel like I'm missing a key thing somewhere (the street sign letters everyone is wearing? the deeper ironies of Bron being into metalogics? the meaning of the vlet Gods??) that, were I to understand it, would make the whole thing come clear to me. but I did not find it! i think I was just a lot more interested in the spike than in bron's gross ways, and something about the book's ironic ending being like--"the transsexual sits in her bar, and many wish to love her, but she can let no one in" hit pretty hard.

I appreciate this book a lot--it was extremely gratifying to see how swiftly society responds to bron's transition, and there are multiple models of cis desire for trans / t4t that are pretty magical for like 1973??? like no joke that is great! but i feel like the book kind of wants it both ways--trans ppl are both Very Normal and Somehow Unseemly--and something about its final specter of transsexuality as Eternal Punishment (again, if you're an evil trans who does it for evil reasons, not a true trans who will be happy) felt sad.

I love the elemental restaurant very much

Ben Babcock says

It's been almost five weeks since I did this, so let's hope my skills haven't atrophied *too* much! My student teaching practicum was awesome, but it left me little time for reading and no time for reviewing. Now I need to catch up. So please forgive me if the details in this review are sparser than ordinary; there is a very good reason why I write reviews as soon as possible after finishing a book!

Fortunately, *Triton* is a very memorable book, which one might have expected coming from Samuel R. Delany. I love the edition I have, another Bantam 1976 yellowing reprint, similar to my edition of *Dhalgren*, that I picked up at a used bookstore for \$1.05. The cover alone makes me feel much more connected to the zeitgeist in which Delany was immersed when he wrote this, and that's crucial to an understanding of this book. If you allow me to get reader-response on you for a moment, *Triton* is a book that will affect you differently depending on your generation. I know I say this a lot—you can call it a recurring theme of my reviews, if you like—but it's true in this case. Politics runs through *Triton* like its lifeblood. Sexual politics, gender politics, even military politics all play a role. The characters themselves are more like puppets in an intricate stage play of the human psyche, in which they are battling for the one, best way to express themselves to the outside world. Hence the generational meanings—someone raised in the 1960s is going to interpret the politics and Delany's themes differently than I do in 2011. However, that doesn't depreciate the book's relevance.

Triton is the story of Bron Helstrom's struggle to redefine his identity in order to make his life less

miserable. After running into a travelling actor known as the Spike and sparking up a brief affair, Bron's own checkered and conflicted views on sexuality take front and centre. Bron was once a prostitute on Mars, where, unlike Earth, male prostitution is legal. He had sex with both men and women for business. Now he lives on Triton, where people live in communes or co-ops that are often divided by sex or sexuality. He has chosen to live in an all-male commune. His next-door neighbour is a homosexual man whom Bron views alternatively with respect and derision, for Lawrence refuses the rejuvenation treatments that keep most people healthy and youthful. Bron is much less comfortable with homosexuality, with unconventional gender performance in general, now that this is no longer his profession.

Bron is also selfish. He wants and wants and will often do things to get what he wants that he only perceives as harmful in hindsight—mildly sociopathic would be a good term, perhaps. This proves, ultimately, to be detrimental to his relationship with the Spike, a fact that becomes apparent when they run into each other while Bron is part of a political delegation to the antagonistic Earth. The Spike leaves Bron with a heartfelt, dictated letter that tells him in detail why she cannot like him, and this acts as the catalyst for the decision that offsets the last part of *Triton* from everything that comes before.

I would probably have to provide a play-by-play summary of the entire book to describe in detail the episodes that cause Bron to make his final decision. Suffice it to say, *Triton* is an intricate book. Delany really does manage to create this amazing microcosm of a possible future society, one where advances in technology make it practical to alter one's sexual orientation and sexual and gender identities on fundamental biological and genetic levels. Many science-fiction authors create such societies in order to explore the implications of those technologies—and there is nothing wrong with that—but Delany elevates this exploration to another level, creating the technologies to explore the issues they uncover. These issues are already present, simmering beneath the surface of society and occasionally bursting forth. The technology of *Triton* makes them more accessible for discussion—and the quality of that discussion is what makes *Triton* so memorable.

The subtitle of this book is *An Ambiguous Heterotopia*, alluding to *The Dispossessed*, by Ursula K. Le Guin. I can see the similarities, and this does make a good companion read. Both books present competing governments whose politics are in flux, with individuals undergoing moments of intense personal crisis against the backdrop of this larger conflict. I admit to preferring *The Dispossessed* though, and that might entirely be due to the portrayals of Bron versus Shevek. Bron is a jerk. There. I said it!

I am even more intrigued, however, by the connection to Foucault's ideas of a heterotopia as a type of privileged "other" space. I suppose Delany sets up Triton itself as a heterotopia separate from the warring planets of Earth and Mars. Triton is physically distant from the other two planets, and the inhabitants of Triton consider people from "worlds" laughably different. Our view of life on Earth and Mars is heavily biased, of course, but it seems like the moons are refuges from more authoritarian regimes on the worlds. For all its advantages, however, life on Triton is not without its hardships and its disadvantages—hence the ambiguity. Bron confronts this at the same time that he confronts his dissatisfaction with his own life.

I confess I didn't see the ending coming, and it altered my opinion of the entire book. It creates this very distinct division between what came before and what comes after. I suppose the question, which Delany of necessity leaves unanswered, is whether Bron's decision will actually have the desired effect. Will this dramatic alteration to his life and lifestyle change him for the better? I think it was very drastic (hence why I found it unexpected), but it also makes a kind of odd sense.

Like *Dhalgren*, *Triton* is another *difficult* book. I didn't find it nearly so difficult as *Dhalgren* to read, but it raises difficult issues and stretches the mould of the conventional plot-driven narrative. I'm coming to see this as "typical Delany", and while not every writer can get away with that kind of intense devotion to themes, he can. Because Delany doesn't back down, and the result are books that are still relevant thirty-five years later. He raises questions about sex and sexuality, gender identity and performance. And while *Triton*

is without question a science-fiction novel, Delany makes that seem unimportant compared to the story he's telling through his characters. He makes offhand references to technology and science we don't have, and sometimes it doesn't always seem plausible—but it's always to a purpose. *Triton* is a well-constructed, thoughtful, thought-provoking piece of literature.

A says

A somewhat cautious and tentative 4 for a very unique and interesting book. As with all things, interesting does not always mean "good," but in this case it leans more in that direction.

I must admit that some of my trepidation early on was due to not having built sufficient trust yet in the author, being uncertain what sort of ride I had agreed to and how it would come together. It is an often rambling book, with a more internalized, character-oriented focus than much SF. The events that would be primary in so much SF are treated almost as background, though they are an important and intrinsic aspect of the plot. We tend to think of inter-planetary wars as the "main event" so to speak in these sorts of novels, not on par with the kinds of skirmishes we can ignore while other people (or drones) fight them for us. That would almost be like real life, one supposes, and we should like to see cool spaceships.

Instead, we have Bron, former Martian native, trying to adapt to life on Triton after many years of living there, thinking maybe he is happy and then not being so sure of it. Oddly, this world is a sort of libertarian/anarchist utopia--or what Delany calls a heterotopia--where very few restrictions are placed on ones dress or sexuality, but where marriage is illegal and money does not exist. Delany calls this a heterotopia, because his goal isn't to depict some ideal, perfectly functioning society; rather, he problematizes (his words) his world by showing how surveillance is done openly and also by the fact that it fails to provide happiness for all its citizens. Such as Bron and others from Earth or Mars, where a more restrictive value system is in place.

It's worth noting here that the novel is titled "An Ambiguous Heterotopia," in blatant reference to the subtitle of La Guinn's classic *The Dispossessed*. But the bulk of this novel was written prior to Delaney having read that novel. The story here is not set up as a direct analogy, and the subtitle is meant more to position it in dialogue with La Guinn's utopia.

Delaney here is not so interested in the minutia of how the government on Triton functions (though he does sketch in the parts that are necessary) and instead focuses his concern on Bron's experience of the place--moreover, his development as a character within it. Bron is initially likable, has the qualities we would deem intrinsic to a more heroic protagonist--good-looking, seemingly principled, even spontaneous (also male, white). As the story progresses, it doesn't take long to see that he is not really so principled, that he is willing to bend the truth to suit him, that he's egotistical and defensive, that he's resentful of others' success. This will all come to a head in his relationship with The Spike, who he will come to resent as his feelings are unrequited.

It's really rare (at least in my experience) to find a SF novel that invests this kind of concern in the characters and uses the SF context as a means to develop and push them further. This aspect surprised me, and by the middle of the book, when I understood that this would be the primary thrust of the story, I settled in and waited for everything to unfold. It wasn't because I cared deeply about Bron (I doubt I could even stand someone so blatantly dysfunctional), but because he was an interesting personality and I wanted to watch him develop. I wanted to understand why he would eventually change his sex and gender identity and what

that would mean for him. The resolution does not bode well, but leaves an opening for some turn...perhaps.

All this is quite wonderful, but the novel is still rambling at times and could potentially throw off the reader unable to get into the rhythm of the thing. I am reminded somewhat of Gormenghast novels, which also take a more character-oriented approach within a fantasy context and are similarly rambling. It is an exploratory, immersive approach, like a child being given a box of crayons and marveling at the marks they're making as a form begins to take shape. Delany is not the same caliber of writer as Peake, at least not in this novel (he's simply not so masterfully lyrical or even as expansive), but he does have a similar willingness to freely explore his self-created world, always bringing it back to the themes that concern him most.

Along with the tendencies to wander, there are the numerous infodumps, whose purpose was initially lost on me. After reading the appendix and an interview with Delany, however, it all began to make sense and what I had confusedly read as a nonsensical explanation of the shields and what-not...turned out to be, well, nonsense. As another reader aptly points out, these thematically fit well with Bron's efforts to explain his own reasoning and collection of lies and half-truths about himself and others. They also comment on the nature of science fiction and its tendency toward truthiness.

Whether the novel fully gels into a whole, whether it ever fully justifies its ramble is a tough question, and that is why my rating here is tentative. This is the sort of novel that improves the more I think about it, the more I think about Bron and the world of Triton, and the world around it, the more I consider the mix of playfulness and seriousness of the parts. But I'd be lying if I said there were not parts where I wondering where it was getting to and how soon. Or whether the writer's skills was always up to the challenge of his aims. A writer can have all the brilliant ideas in the world, but if the parts don't add up to a whole experience, what does it matter? Nonetheless, in this case the author *does* bring the story to a unified conclusion for its troubled antagonist, and that is why when I finished it was easy to cast my doubts aside. I am looking forward to reading more of Delaney's work.

Scott says

Wow. What an interesting and completely frustrating book. I'm glad this wasn't my first experience with Delany, as I likely would not have returned to him. So, if you haven't read Delany before, I wouldn't recommend starting here (Dhalgren is amazing. Nova is also a good choice). However, as frustrating as the book and the main character are, this is a finely crafted book written with lots of intention; it's also a book that manages to do what it sets out to do, perfectly. So, on a technical level, maybe a good book, but not a very enjoyable one. But, as I've also found, it's a fruitful source of conversation/discussion.

This book is mostly a character study of Bron. While the book is a third-person narration, it's presented from the limited perspective of Bron himself. There are some larger things going on in the background of the novel (like, a war between the planets and moons of our solar system), but they are always presented as being secondary to what's going on in Bron's head/world. This is one of the things I find interesting about the novel: most science fiction books (at least of a certain kind) tend to focus on these bigger events, like war and politics. Here, however, Delany very purposefully puts them in the background and tells us that Bron is more worthy of our focus. This reversal is neat, and subverts these more 'masculine' topics (war, politics, etc.).

Bron himself is not meant to be a likeable character. In fact, he's kind of a dick. In this imagined world where heterosexism and homophobia have apparently vanished, he is homophobic, sexist, and basically the worst humanity has to offer. He's also incredibly selfish, and has no emotional intelligence to speak of. Basically,

he's a dude. He's a "nice guy". Interestingly, one of the people the novel is dedicated to is Isaac Asimov. I still remember reading Foundation and being completely shocked upon realizing that I had gotten most of the way through the novel without a single female character even making an appearance (but don't worry: in the last story there's a wife who nags at her husband...yep). I think I can see why Asimov would be there: this novel exposes the ugly sides of sexism, homophobia, and racism that is implicit in Asimov's works (but is obviously not addressed in any way in his novels - it's simply the norm). Also, to go back, Asimov was someone who looked only at the big things (politics, etc.), and would never have investigated his character's basic, problematic assumptions about life. While I think that the sort of work Delany is doing here is really interesting and important, my only complaint about it is that, as a result, Bron is not a very realistic character. Bron is the worst we have to offer, and while there is a little bit of Bron in all of us (we all have problematic shit running wild in our heads), there are very few human beings who deserve as little compassion as Bron does. In this way, he is a caricature. I wonder which method would have been more effective: the one Delany gives us, a caricature; or a more realistic character, which might perhaps give us some insight into why people do awful things. I'm guessing both methods have their place. With Delany's method, it is easier to identify Bron's problematic aspects, but (I think) harder to identify him in ourselves.

Something that is awesome about Delany, and for which he is well-known for, is his giving queerness a place in literature, and especially in science fiction (which had, until around this time, been notoriously heterosexist). The queers are everywhere in this one! While we aren't given a beloved queer hero, queerness is made very visible and given space in this human landscape. (Although I have to admit, I don't know how I feel about the idea of gay / straight co-ops. Sounds more like a porno fantasy than an actual way to live. I'm also not a huge proponent of segregation. But I get it Delany... I get it.) There's also a trans character in this novel which I think is done very well, given the time it was published. For most of the narrative, we aren't told this character is trans, then, suddenly, this fact is relevant for a paragraph, then we move on. Great. Bron has a very brief struggle with pronouns, gets over it, and moves along. Good job Bron. [spoiler] In the last section of the novel, the sex change operation is used with a character to make a point; however I think it would be problematic to see this character as being genuinely trans (you'll see what I mean). However, pronoun changes / etc. are flawless, and I think this could be very eye-opening for readers who've never known trans folks in real life. On another note, there's a lot less gay sex representation in this one (too bad!); but you can always read many of Delany's other novels, if that's what your needing!

Info-dumps are another thing science fiction is well-known for. I think Delany uses them in a very interesting way here (although they still made me groan a bit, even if they are making an interesting point). Delany uses scientific thought as the basic assumption for his info-dumps, but he turns this scientific thought into metaphor. This is obvious only a short way into the book where Bron is explaining "metalogic" and he gives us a ridiculous equation that's filled with mathematical/scientific symbols - but there's no way this equation actually makes any sense. I think these ridiculous (but very convincing) info-dumps that are presented with scientific language / structure serve to show us that the authority that is science, is just another arbitrary form of knowing. By taking that scientific structure (for examples, the equation) and presenting it to us while it is explaining something to us that doesn't actually make any sense, shows us that part of what makes science so legitimate to us is its style. While reading through these info-dumps, you get the sense that they *should* make sense. For the thoughtful reader, this might open up the idea that there are other, legitimate ways of knowing. Scientific knowing is just the one we have given authority to.

Anyway, I'll stop there. But needless to say this is an interesting book. There's a lot to talk about, and have good conversation about. It's just too bad that it isn't written in a way that is engrossing. I like it when books have a more intellectual side, I just prefer it to be coupled with good storytelling, which I don't think Delany achieves here. Seriously, just read Dhalgren.

Michael Battaglia says

What a lot of people forget sometimes that SF at its best isn't about bug eyed men with rayguns threatening buxom women while spaceships crash together overhead and time travelers from the past wander around in the future all confused . . . it's a genre that when done properly is obsessed with ideas, using the framework of SF to extrapolate trends in society to what the author sees as logical conclusions (which is different than trying to predict the future, which decent SF never actually tried to do, leaving that task to consummate professionals like Nostradamus), or taking aspects of human behavior and using a bizarre setting as a background upon which to work out the interplay, or even use hard science to take something that should be considered impossible and give it a realistic grounding to say that even the unlikely is still possible in a universe of endless possibilities. You read enough SF and the sheer amount of potential ideas is dizzying.

But the author has a kind of unspoken contract with the reader in that they can use the story as an avenue for whatever ideas they feel necessary to work out and the reader will go along with them, at least initially, but at the very least they can't forget to write an actual story to go along with those ideas. Otherwise, it should properly be called an essay and there's an entire other section of the bookstore for that kind of thing. Even the best writers are guilty of it now and again, as monumental as Robert Heinlein was to SF, there are a few of his novels late in his life that consist of vaguely drawn characters acting as mouthpieces for his ideas, which is great if you're in tune with them, but if you're not you'll be crying for mercy fairly quickly.

Delany can generally strike a nice balance between ideas and plot . . . his early novels like "The Einstein Intersection" and "Babel-17" were quite capable of giving us rather exciting SF plots while dazzling us with the weight of his ideas. Later on the balance started to shift slightly as he began more obviously interested in exploring questions of gender and sexuality in the context of science-fiction. When it worked ("Dhalgren", which is both wearying and exhilarating in equal measure and is so massive that it probably defies any attempt to break it down) the results were like nothing else in the genre, or American literature in general. When it didn't entirely work ("Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand", in my opinion) you felt that he was consumed with working out whatever literary theory he had become fascinated with that the plot was kind of secondary.

"Trouble on Triton" (altered on republication from its original name of simply "Triton") skews a bit more toward plot than ceaselessly communicating ideas but there are moments when it comes perilously close to falling over the edge onto the wrong side of storytelling. In this future, we visit the utopian society on Triton, one of the moons of Neptune and thus decently far away from Earth, which works out nicely because we're apparently in the midst of or about to go to war with them. Into this we follow recent resident Brom Helstrom, who does not front for the galaxy's greatest metal band as you might assume but is a former prostitute from Mars that now works in the field of metalogics but seems to work mostly at pissing off everyone around him by being completely self-absorbed and not having the slightest bit of self-awareness of why he ticks off nearly everyone he comes into contact with, assuming its everyone else's fault or just not even realizing how much he's making them angry, even when they go and say things to him like, "You make me so angry that I never want to speak to you again."

Delany seems to be using Brom to dissect assumptions about gender and sexuality in his future utopia (apparently the whole novel is a sort of response to Ursula Le Guin's "The Dispossessed", which is also highly recommended but really nothing like this at all), mostly by having Brom make the wrong assumption about everyone and thus have to be corrected, whether it's his coworkers or the theatre lady he met recently that should be totally into him and for some reason isn't, even when he's made it clear he's totally into her. But in Delany's Triton sexuality is somewhat fluid, with people changing genders at the drop of a hat (which made this more like a response to "The Left Hand of Darkness" for me, but that's neither here nor there) and able to change their preferences for gender whenever they want if they're willing to spend the money for an operation . . . you have essentially a very libertarian society where pretty much anything goes and the

government really doesn't get to have much say in anything (in an early scene, it's clear you can check at a booth exactly what information the government has on you at any time you want).

To that end, Delany has clearly thought out the intricacies of the society and part of the fun of the novel is that going along with Brom as he not only explores the structure of the society but the culture of it as well, so that we get to see the mindset of the people that would live in this kind of place . . . it's a welcome contrast to Brom getting everything wrong pretty much all the time and he's able to construct his future world with such detail that even when it doesn't seem much is happening he's introducing a new concept that has you pondering exactly how it all fits together. It's a society of moving parts, not just socially but politically as well, and if nothing else the driving force of the book is the slow escalation and then breakdown of the situation with Earth, a constantly lurking background presence that looms to the forefront in sometimes surprising ways (a sudden gravity reversal, a trip to Earth that Brom tags along for and doesn't go well at all), proving that no utopia is perfect if there's someone who can come around and wreck it at any moment. The changes of scenery are useful as well, with the aforementioned sidetrip to Earth being a highlight (despite it also featuring Brom failing to score again, and failing to understand why he fails to score) and all of it is so interesting that you almost really don't need Brom around at all. Amusingly, he seems to write himself into the novel, unless a bisexual black character named Sam is somehow a strange coincidence. He also gets a bunch of the good lines, but then that's what I would do, too.

Alas, as the book goes on you do get the underlying sense that Delany is constructing an argument toward a theory that isn't entirely clear and while it never threatens to overwhelm the book it acts like an anchor around certain parts of it, weighing the plot down until it becomes nearly inert, so much that the scenes that are supposed to be the driving intellectual focus of the book don't ever catch fire like the best exchange of ideas can (and the mock essays at the back "Informal Remarks Toward the Modular Calculus" don't exactly clear matters up) though part of that is the delivery system, which Brom too busy acting as the Charlie Brown of the future to really convey his fundamental flaw (which appears to be that he's just dense) . . . it's telling that the best parts of the novel are the scenes dealing with the war with Earth, conveying an exotic menace and mundane danger that is recognizable even today, with the destruction being senseless and the toll as random as any war. These sections have a momentum to them that the rest of the novel sometimes lacks, where scenes float in and out without it ever really being clear what the point is. We're supposed to take Brom's eventual decision (described in the cover copy of my edition but I suppose I won't spoil it here) as the ultimate in misunderstanding, he so fundamentally fails to grasp what the problem that he goes for the wrong solution entirely and then can't figure out why it doesn't actually work. And then after briefly exploring the ramifications of that decision, the book pretty much just ends, as if Delany had reached the end of his essay and didn't care if he had more plot.

It doesn't quite qualify as a failed experiment (and as a reading experience it's several lengths more entertaining than "Stars in My Pocket") since the richness of the ideas still shines through the at times less than exciting story. But then when the story gets exciting it starts to mask the intensity of the ideas, resulting in an uneasy see-saw balance that the novel isn't quite able to resolve by the end. What we're left with is fascinating enough but considering how bold some of its ideas are (especially in the 1970s, where literature was only just starting to face this stuff head-on) it's clear that it doesn't have the impact that it should, and it's not for lack of trying. What we have is a story that isn't quite plot-stuffed enough to act as a story and an essay that isn't structured well enough to get its ideas across clearly so that even people who are thinking about this stuff hard may not be able to decipher it. It definitely has its merits, especially in a world where questions of gender and sexuality and where the lines are drawn (if indeed there need to be lines at all) are more relevant than ever, but it seems at times that the work is intent on speaking its own language, and not completely concerned if it's a language we're fluent in, or showing us how to learn it.

David Haws says

I love the idea (p. 280) of academically-motivated, counter-performance artists: "As the sculpture had been completed, three artists from a rival school, masked in turquoise but otherwise nude, had rushed into the cafeteria and, with flamers, destroyed the work, charring and melting the plates." Similarly, I found the chaotic description of a gravitational anomaly attack quirky and compelling. While the examination of reproduction as a "normal-off system" was interesting, as were the explorations of marginal sexual possibilities, these sometimes caused the novel to feel like a fanciful ethnographic study. Also, I never quite decided what to do with all the parenthetical statement (it seems that they were meant to indicate linguistic evolution, not unlike *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress*, but felt more like the result of a neurological disorder).

Jayaprakash Satyamurthy says

In some ways, Triton is as much about science fiction as it is about social and political models.

The infodump or exposition is a vital part of the SF genre; it helps ground us in the imagined world of the story at hand and to contextualise those uniquely science-fictional sentences Delany is so fond of, formations like Heinlein's 'the door dilated' or a statement like 'her world exploded', which could have a much more literal meaning in a science fiction novel than in a mundane novel.

Infodumps give us the necessary context to understand things that do not gel with our everyday experience, they help understand social, political, cultural and technological elements of a story's background that are taken for granted when reading a book about our own times and our own people.

But an infodump is not necessarily informative in the strict sense; there are endless examples of SF infodumps that offer an explanation for things that we know cannot be explained because they have not happened; furthermore, the explanation probably does not have much practical value, because except in very rare cases no one has gone and done those things in the manner suggested therein (although the device or technique described may since have been developed in some different way). Instead, it is a sort of gesture, a string of words with enough familiar terms to reassure the average SF reader (defined by Delany as having the equivalent of a bright 13-year old's knowledge of science) that this is 'proper science' mixed in with enough plausible-sounding esoterica to convince that reader that something fairly authoritative has been said.

One of the first proper infodumps in this book happens when an attack has just been made on Triton, and a government official is trying to tell his companions in a men's cooperative housing building that the brief gravity failure that took place is nothing to worry about. He gives an explanation that starts by referring to things that seem to relate to 'real' science, and rapidly becomes esoteric. Then he is asked to tone it down so that a mentally-deficient person present can understand. He gives a simpler explanation that his person can understand - and even this version makes no sense on our terms if looked at closely. Just as the government agent does not really know quite what has happened, but is asserting his authority by seeming knowledgeable, Delany is giving his made-up explanation more authority by showing how even a mentally-deficient member of his future society can understand what flied over our own head. This is a very clever device, and a way to both demonstrate and practice one of the chief uses of the SF infodump.

But there are many other infodumps in this book. Some relate to a made-up discipline of metalogics - something which again has no relation to any real system of logic we might be able to conceive of, some are in the form of descriptions of dramatic pieces couched in the jargon of academic cultural studies, some relate to genetics and medicine. Others are more personal.

All the infodumps that relate to disciplines of this future world start in terms that seem to make sense, then move into more or less incomprehensible realms for a very long time - most of the mental context of these people is way, way ahead of our own, Delany seems to be implying.

And then there are the personal infodumps. These are much more comprehensible, even as they tell us things about society and politics on the different planets and satellites of the solar system that are quite fantastic by today's standards. But on the human level, once we adjust a little, they are perfectly comprehensible.

Except that the main character of this novel, Bron Hellstrom, seems to see very different things in these personal revelations than we do. We begin by trying to empathise with what seems to be the main character and hence hero of this story. And yet, we slowly find that the people he resents are among the most integral, self-actualised and compassionate individuals he encounters, and the society he hates is a sort of libertarian utopia that in many ways seems to be superior to any current earth society. This brings us to the more commonly discussed aspects of this novel - how it belongs to a dialogue on ambiguous utopias with novels like Ursula K. Le Guin's 'The Dispossessed', how different societies offer different kinds of liberties and privileges, how much of this is governed by factors like resources and space and may not be possible or even desirable in other circumstances, and what means are justifiable to preserve a desirable way of life. There's also a commentary on gender relations and roles that is worth investigating.

Just as interestingly, Triton is a fascinating study of a completely dysfunctional individual, but one that is told almost entirely via a closely focused third person narrative that gives us this individual's thoughts and perspectives rather than anyone else's. It's easy to fall into subjectivity here, like the people who are seduced by the prose in *Lolita* and forget that the narrator is a deeply sick sexual predator. Delany's achievement is that Bron's anomie is made clear to us despite immersion in his viewpoint.

I haven't even begun to scratch the surface of what there is to enjoy and think about in this novel; there is a passage in one of the appendices where Delany offers a comparison of the difficulty of understanding SF versus its potential range of expression as compared to mundane fiction that evokes similar dichotomies between tonal and atonal music, representational and abstract art. This alone is a point that deserves being engaged with in detail; that odd second appendix opens up even more ideas. The whole narrative is a mine-field seeded with explosive ideas and concepts. This is a science fiction novel that does it all - engages in a dialogue with its genre, offers deep, thought-provoking world-building and gives us total character-immersion. It isn't so much that they don't write them like this anymore as that they hardly ever did.

Jason says

Everyone talks about how this is a political or cultural or social exploration novel, and that's all true, but what fascinates me about it is how incredibly PSYCHOLOGICAL it is. The cultural and social stuff is pretty simple - Samuel Delany has created here an honest-to-goodness utopia, a world in which everyone can essentially be anyone they want to be. You're a woman who wants to be a male homosexual? No problem. There's a community for you. You want to have scales and a tail? No problem. There's a community for you. You're white, and you want to be black, or orange? No problem. There's a community for you. There seems to be a complete acceptance of others in this world in regards to race, sex, gender, sexuality, profession....even theater artists are accepted!

But then what's the story? Ah, that's the masterstroke. The thing of it is, the novel is narrated by a man who hates the place. He is more or less a 20th-century guy. He could be any guy from today, perhaps on the slightly conservative side. And Delany places this very modern-seeming man into the far future and into a world where problems of personal identity have been more or less eliminated, and then tells the story of how

that modern man of today just can't find his place in it. He doesn't fit in; he doesn't get it. It is the contrast between this utopia of malleable and universally accepted identities and this man's hatred of it that serves as the spine of this novel.

And I found it riveting. The guy's impossible, and yet...and yet - I sort of see where he's coming from. Because I, too, am a man of today, and perhaps I share some of the insecurities and prejudices of this asshole. Frightening! But that's why this book is so good. As a reader, I had to ask myself, would I have been happy in this utopia? Would I be okay with anyone being able and encouraged to be absolutely whatever they want to be? Isn't that a bit childish? This is particularly topical in today's world, isn't it, what with people all being encouraged to embrace their "true selves," whatever that may be. We applaud every person who comes out of whatever dark closet they had hidden their true identities. The only person today, evidently, who has any right to say just who and what you are is YOU. This is a very new phenomenon, and I know a lot of people have an instinctive and visceral reaction against it. So, could I enjoy a world just like that, a world without stability of identity, without structure and limitations and labels? Or would I also be a miserable curmudgeon, just like this guy? The novel invites self-introspection, and that is a rare feat.

And to anyone who fears they won't enjoy the novel because they won't sympathize with the narrator-protagonist, just know that you aren't meant to sympathize with him. He's an unreliable narrator, and if you were to sympathize with him, you would misunderstand the themes and purpose of the novel. Feel free to hate him. It's what Delany intended. Even as I saw where his discomforts came from, I hated him. He was a joy to hate. This novel is about how, even in a utopia, some people just couldn't be happy, and that's why I say the novel is so splendidly psychological. It's about how stuck we get in our own patterns, how resistant to change we are, how obtuse we can be about other people's feelings, about how we rationalize damaging other people. It doesn't deliver any pat answers - this isn't Dr. Phil. But it does present, to my mind, an extremely convincing portrait of the kind of human being who is all too common today, even perhaps in parts of ourselves, as social and cultural barriers to happiness start falling away one by one.

Read it as a psychological examination of the character's misery and attitudes and inability to adapt to a world without boundaries, and I believe you will get a great deal out of it. Strongly recommended.

Erika says

Trouble on Triton is supposed to inhabit a utopian (heterotopic) future when Earth is no longer the only hospitable planet, where personal expression has evolved through a widened acceptance of differing sexualities, and gender takes on radical new perspectives. I appreciated the gender exploration, but found it extremely hard to sympathize with the protagonist, Bron Helstrom. As a teenager, Bron was a (legal) male prostitute, but well into adulthood, he seems homophobic. This wasn't the worse of his qualities. He's also egotistical, self-centered, and unbelievably frustrating. Despite this, he manages to live in an all-male commune--the evolved living situation in Delany's imagined future. Convinced no one save himself understands his situation, Bron chooses a radical future for himself that ultimately leaves him less satisfied than before.

The homages to a quaint, ancient Earth where manners and delicate social maneuvering like tipping and gentlemanliness, are satire at its best. Delany also challenges preconceived notions of gender and sexuality that, along with his humor, make *Trouble on Triton* worth the read. Bron, however, ruined most of the novel for me, but he also pushed me to think the most. I wonder if using such an unsympathetic, irritating protagonist so out of his element in a free, sexually liberating universe, to impose such an anomaly, is to present a creature wholly relatable to an extant homophobic readership upon publication.

Maybe the fact that Bron goes to such lengths to discover himself is really a plea or wishful thinking rather than the indictment of white male intellectual thinking Delany presents. I'm inclined this direction only because Bron doesn't, in fact, discover anything past the stubborn limitations of his psyche, but he *does* seem to reach an honesty with himself at the end, if a disappointing one. Optimistically, he did try, albeit for the wrong reasons. Close-minded or not, Bron Helstrom represents the worst in all of us; our frustration with him is a frustration with the limited prejudices we recognize in our own society.

For example, men and women freely wander the pages of this book in little to no clothing without apparent embarrassment or fear. In a society where sexuality has become so evolved and the human body less of a sin than a recognizable joy, it's no wonder and an odd restoration of peace among us, that women, as well as men can exercise that right. However, Bron frequently expresses extreme irritation when propositioned and even scorns the naked physicality of his male suitors, choosing instead disgust rather than flattery if, say, Lawrence were female, over his prospects despite not being gay.

If you don't mind a book that so openly features the best and worst of human sexuality, gender (and mannerisms in regard to either), definitely pick up *Trouble on Triton*. The only questions I have are: does Delany ever get tired of a naked cast or do his characters ever get cold?

Jo Walton says

<http://www.tor.com/blogs/2008/08/triton>
