

"Longing for What Never Was" – Steampunk Romance and Nostalgia

Maria Nilson

In turbulent times we seem to look back to what is familiar, to what was or rather, to what might have been, in order to find security and maybe also hope for the future (Nilson 2022). It is no wonder that television-dramas such as *Downton Abbey* and *Bridgerton* are popular today. We seem to long for the past, but not the past as it was, but rather an "other" version of the past. A past that is different from our present, but still familiar enough so that we feel that we belong in it. The tv- adaptation of Julia Quinn's historical romance novels about the Bridgerton family are an interesting example. The story takes place in the Regency period and follows an upper-class family with eight siblings. How much is a depiction of the past and how much is a comment of the present? When do historical fiction need to be accurate and when is anachronisms welcome? There was an outcry after the first episode of season 1 with included a scene where the heroine Daphne is forced into a corset, but a corset from the 1850s rather than a Regency-corset. But when Daphne and her duke dances to a version of Madonna's "Material Girl" many applauded. Historical fiction often merges historical facts with the modern to establish common ground with readers (Ehriander 2012: 167). The modern reader/viewer needs to be able to connect in some way to the characters to find them compelling. Even if there is a widespread idea that some human traits are "universal" and never changes, few believe that an 19th century person would act and think exactly as a contemporary one. A lot of historical fiction balance between depicting a past that is, on some level "correct", but change it enough so that it feels familiar for a modern reader.

Maybe there is an advantage to imagining a different past? Steampunk romance can be seen as an example of trying to do this; of trying to envision a different kind of past what might be able to change the society we live in. There is an episode from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, season 7, "Badda-Bing, Badda – Bang" which takes place in a holographic version of a 1940s nightclub in the US which is interesting in this context. Commander Sisko complains to his wife Cassidy that this version of history hides the fact that a black man would never be allowed to be a guest at such a night club. Cassidy answers that the version of history told in the holodeck program is how history *should* have been.

But what happens when we imagine a different past, an alternate history in speculative fiction? When the anachronism, in a way, take over? In this article I focus on this longing for that never really was with the help of steampunk romance novels discussed below read with through the lens of

Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* in which she envisions two different kinds of nostalgia (Boym 2001). Using Boym's definitions, I argue that the steampunk novels discussed contain different versions of a nostalgic longing. Is this nostalgic longing always filled with peril? Or might reinventing the past be a way forward?

My examples are from what could be labelled mainstream steampunk romance with authors like Kady/Kate Cross,¹ Gail Garriger, Bec McMaster and Kate Locke. The novels analysed can be seen as examples of steampunk romance but steampunk as a genre consists of several different subgenres as it is a vast genre with authors like Scott Westerfeld, Philip Reeve, Cherie Priest, China Méville and Elizabeth Bear, to name but a few. It is also a growing genre with e-books and self-publications, which is one reason that we today have such a variety of texts (Bowser & Croxall: xiv-xv).

The article begins with an introduction to steampunk followed by a discussion on nostalgia. I then turn to the novels and analyse the reimagined past that is presented and focuses on both the possibilities and the pitfalls of imagining a different past. The article concludes with how we can understand this imagination with the help of Boym's ideas of nostalgia.

Steampunk – what is it?

Steampunk is a particularly interesting example of speculative fiction as it is a diverse genre which focuses on how to understand the present using the past (Nilson & Ehriander 2019). Defining what speculative fiction might be is not uncomplicated. R.B. Gill argues that: "Classification is at best a complex and controversial activity. The woolly tangle of types and examples commonplace in speculative fiction makes it especially so" (Gill 2013: unpaginated). Speculative fiction, on some level, avoids a clearcut definition, and can be used to problematize genre labels such as science fiction and fantasy (ibid). Speculative fiction as a long tradition of "making the familiar strange" and thus forcing its readers to question the world around them (Farstad 2023: 14). In steampunk the "defamiliarization" is often achieved how the genre's attitude towards history, where historical facts and fantastical elements are blended. If we focus on steampunk's attitude towards both a historical past and an envisioned future, it can be argued that it fits rather nicely in the fold of speculative fiction. S. R. Tolliver discusses speculative fiction to make a previously marginalized history visible in "Can I Get a Witness? Speculative Fiction as Testimony and Counterstory". Using examples of black storytelling that combine realistic elements with fantastical ones, the study shows how this mix has a potential to destabilize traditional views of historical past which as excluded all those without power (Tolliver 2020; unpaginated).

¹ This author uses different names and writes steampunk romance for an adult audience as Kate Cross and for a Young Adult audience as Kady Cross.

The most common way to describe steampunk is as “Victorian science fiction”, a blend of historical fiction and science fiction. Another way to describe the genre is: “it’s a way of looking at the future based on the collective imagination of the past” (Winchester 2014: 10). The term itself is coined by K.W. Jeeter in 1987 in connection to his novel, *Infernal devices*. He says:

My coining 1987 of the word steampunk originally might have been more of a humorous jab of a tendency going around those days, of labelling two genre writers with more in common than bipedal locomotion as the ‘[insert word here] punk’ movement, but if it assumed some sort of life after that, or at least clawed itself up from whatever grave in which old jokes are laid to rest... well, it could’ve been worse, lexicographically. (Jeeter 2017: 9)

The genre has naturally evolved in the past thirty-five years. Steampunk is today often a blend of science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, and horror. In steampunk we not only meet flying steamships, a variety of automatons and time travelling devices, but also vampires and werewolves. This makes it a “messy” genre which contains very different kind of texts, but at the same time there are several recurring tropes from female characters clad in corsets, the use of historical figures such as Queen Victoria and Nicholas Tesla, to the fascination with steam engines and goggles (Vandermeer & Chambers). But even if there is a similarity between novels labelled steampunk, there are also many differences. If fantasy as a genre can be described as a “fuzzy concept” (Attebury 1992) then steampunk is more of a chaotic puzzle, making it challenging to describe.

Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller argue in *Steaming into a Victorian Future* that steampunk is a genre defined in a way by being without limits. The novels are often placed in a familiar environment such as London for example, where realistic details are blended with fantastic ones.

Here, in a London darker and wilder than anything imagined by Dickens, scientists and magicians, philosophers and poets, time travellers and clockwork humans animate worlds inspired by Gothic romances, where extraordinary inventions are seamlessly integrated into everyday life. (Taddeo & Miller 2014: xv)

When talking about steampunk as a genre, it is important to remember that it is a collection of different genres, a genre characterized by hybridity. Rachel A. Bower and Brian Croxall says in *Like Clockwork* that “As a literary genre, it is frequently discussed under the umbrella of science fiction and speculative fiction, raising interesting questions for critics about the relationship between technology, history, and ideology, as well as about what counts as science fiction” (Bower & Croxall 2016: xix). Just as R.B. Gill argues that trying to define speculative fiction raises interesting questions about what constitutes a genre (Gill 2013), steampunk can be seen as another example of this

phenomena. Steampunk also often includes a discussion of our understanding of history and how we create different versions of a historical past.

But steampunk is not just a genre. It is also a movement, a community with people not just building fictional world, but building a "Teacup Stirling Engine", or a steam driven gigantic penguin or creating your own perfect corset. Jeff Vandermeer and Desirina Boskovich write in *The Steampunk User's Manual. An Illustrated Practical and Whimsical Guide to Creating Retro-Futuristic Dreams* what "One person's unmakeable one-hundred-foot-high Steampunk penguin is another's plot device for a sprawling steampunk novel trilogy" (Vandermeer & Boskovich 2014: 14). The "hands on" part of the steampunk movement where, for example, an author like Gail Carrigan makes her own Victorian-influenced attire complete with corsets and gowns, can be understood in many ways. Roger Whitson argues in "How to Theorize with a Hammer; or Making and Baking Things in Steampunk and Digital Humanities" that, for example, Victorian baking contests can be seen as a way of trying to understand history by practically emerging oneself in it; eating the food, wearing the clothes etcetera (Whitson 2016: 40). Even if my aim in this article is to discuss fiction, it is important to describe the context of these novels as part of a community that is driven both by a desire to relive a past (that is often romanticised) but also have the freedom to change it. When the community is described, words like inclusive and open is often used. Paul Roland argues in *Steampunk. Back to the Future with the New Victorians* that:

Furthermore, steampunk is an all-inclusive community, welcoming one and all regardless of race, colour and creed, unlike their real-life counterparts who weren't kind to the natives, exploiting their natural resources and worse, subjecting them to the tender ministrations of pious missionaries. (Roland 2014: 13)

There are, of course, critical voices that points out that steampunk communities around the world consists mostly of people from a middleclass background with enough money to build a gigantic steam driven penguin and that steampunk as most popular genres are dominated by white middleclass characters that are, for the most part, heterosexual, but there are exceptions (Nilson & Ehriander 2019). Steampunk can be controversial, subversive challenging norms and ideals but it can also strengthen stereotypes and ideas of gender, class, and race.

Steampunk and history

Steampunk is a genre where the aim is to reinvent the past, to offer alternatives and in so doing, offer a critique of what has been. Jenny Sundén says that "Steampunk is [...] centrally concerned with re-imagining the past with the technological sensibilities of the present" (Sundén 2013: 370). It is a genre that feeds on anachronisms. Margaret Rose argues in "Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation" that steampunk can be

read as in a way “defending” the critique of popular culture’s uses of anachronisms.

We might look at steampunk as speculative fiction’s revenge against such arguments because steampunk is a fiction that places premium on minutely accurate historical detail, within flamboyantly wrong imagined pasts, in order to explore the ways in which the conventional historical sensibility sometimes gets it wrong. (Rose 2009: 319)

The “punk” in steampunk, says Rose, “evokes an irreverent attitude toward history”, (Ross 2009:324). This “irreverent attitude” does not mean that historical facts are seen as unimportant. Cherie Priest discusses how to balance facts and fiction in the “Author’s Note” to her novel *Boneshaker*. In this short text she explains how she is aware that her version of Seattle in 1863 is “wrong” as it contains not only anachronisms but also dates well-known events incorrectly but argues that she as a writer must have the freedom to change historical facts in the story world she has created.

So there’s no need to send me helpful e-mails explaining that Kings Street Station wasn’t started until 1904, that the Smith Tower wasn’t begun until 1909, or that Commercial Street really is First Avenue. I know the facts, and every digression from them was deliberate. (Priest 2009: 416)

In the novel it is important that Smith Tower and King Street Station, actual are places that did exist in Seattle. These places situate the novel in a very precise environment, but the Seattle described is not the “real” Seattle, but part of Priest’s story-world. A defining part of steampunk is its blatant disregard for historical facts when creating a different past.

The novels discussed here is what is labelled steampunk romance. Steampunk romance is, of course, connected to historical romance, one of the oldest subgenres in the popular romance genre (Ficke 2020). From Georgette Heyer to Barbara Cartland to Julia Quinn, historical romance has been not only a setting for a love story, but also to imagine a past where, for example, women had an opportunity to be much more than what was often possible. In their introduction to *Steaming Into a Victorian Future* Julie Ann Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller points out how historical romance has become a tool for many authors to critique contemporary society (Taddeo & Miller: xix). Historical romance as a subgenre has changed from the days of Barbara Cartland and Georgette Heyer. Modern historical romance often portrays strong female heroines (Nilson 2015: 63). In novels by Tessa Dare and Eloisa James female protagonists not only travel the continent, become experts on fossils or build habitats for endangered animals, they also find their Happily Ever After-ending with a man who celebrates their strength. Dru Pagliasoutti argues in “Love and the Machine: Technology and Human Relationships in Steampunk Romance and Erotica” that it is in steampunk romance that the “punk” of the genre is most visible. Here strong female characters are not an

exception, but a rule and we find many examples of authors rewriting history to challenge patriarchal ideas and notions. "Although strong female protagonists have since appeared in non-romantic steampunk fiction, romance novels seem to have been instrumental in breaking the barrier" (Pagliasotti 2014: 78).

Speculative fiction has a significant advantage here as it can experiment with the past, making us view it from a different perspective. Discussing the tv-adaptation of *Bridgerton* (reading historical romance as a kind of speculative fiction), Pii K. Posti argues that the casting of Regé-Jean Page as the duke Simon Basset, for example, can be understood to visualize not only racism and racialized power structures, but also the way colonialism has influenced our modern thinking, an influence that continually needs to be problematized and critiqued (Posti 2024: 124). Even if the adaption of Quinn's novels reinforces several integrated stereotypes, Posti sees a potential in the way the series portrays history which is made possible by the genre's attitude towards history (Posti 2024: 137–143). As all renderings of a historical past are always subjective and influenced by the individual creating them, the adaptation both an acknowledgment of that and a kind of celebration of it. When we try and understand and interpret the past, we are always influenced by the contexts in which we are situated. Donna Haraway argues in her today classic article on situated knowledges that there has to be an alternative between the claims of objectivity and complete relativism. No scientist can disregard the context from which they analyse whether its minerals, economic development, or descriptions of historical facts. Haraway says: "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims" (Haraway: 589). In steampunk the goal is not to achieve a rendering of historical facts, but to create a fictional world, and authors make a point to allow themselves the freedom to interpret, visualize and change history as they see fit.

Nostalgia and steampunk

Steampunk is nostalgic in a variety of ways. There is an often-loving tribute to the details of a proper afternoon tea, or a perfectly made corset that visualizes a kind of longing for a romanticized past. But what is nostalgia? Nostalgia was for a long time a description connected with what was seen as a mental illness that soldiers often suffered from. When deployed, their longing for home made them literally ill (Johannisson 2001:8). Even if nostalgia is seen as a much broader concept today, the idea that nostalgia can be basically unhealthy remains (Johannisson 2001: 149). Dwelling on an inaccurate version of the past may make it difficult to live in a real present.

But there is an abundance of ways to define nostalgia which sometimes differs from each other. In an appendix to the book *Revolutionary Nostalgia: Retromania, Neo-Burlesque, and Consumer Culture* Marie-Cécile Cervallon

and Stephen Brown lists over fifty different definitions for nostalgia including: “A sentimental or bittersweet yearning for an experience, product or service from the past” to “Longing for what is lacking” (Cervellon & Brown 2018: 167-168). To yearn for a madeleine cake, for example, is very different from longing for a different way of life. Can all this be nostalgic?

In discussing *Downton Abbey* Rosalía Baena and Christa Byker notes how Julian Barnes drama has created a kind of “collective nostalgia” that not only makes viewers feel as we belong to an exclusive group, but also makes us long back to a time that we are fully aware of as far from perfect. “Especially collective nostalgia can promote a feeling of community that works to downplay or deflect potentially divisive social difference (class, race, gender and so on) even if only temporarily” (Baena & Byker 2015: 261). The past becomes a refuge from the present when we choose to merge ourselves in a version of the past where we might be the countess or the happy housemaid, content with her lot in life; an escape from everyday modern life. The past becomes “easier” than the present.

This nostalgic longing is, of course, something to be very vary of. In Sweden we even have a special name for it – “Bullerby-syndromet” after Astrid Lindgren’s books, an idealized idea of what used to be what has more to do with what we *want* the past to have been like, then what it actually was, (Sjöholm 211: 127). The concept of “Bullerby-syndromet” highlights how this version of the past not only simplifies it by ignoring, for example, rigid class structures and inequalities. The past as presented in Lindgren’s novels are often seen as “better” than the present day. There are countless of examples of how an idealized past has been used as a political tool.

In her book *The Future of Nostalgia* Svetlana Boym discusses growing up in the Soviet Union and how images of, for example, “Mother Russia” was used to strengthen the regime. The past was reimagined and a new version of it was integrated in the story created about the Soviet Union by the government. A way to understand this reimagination is through Boym’s ideas of different kinds of nostalgia. One of her main points are that we need to acknowledge that there are different kinds of nostalgia. She defines *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgia as follows:

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nosts* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance [...] Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstruction of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on the ruins, the patina of time and history in the dreams on another place and another time. (Boym 2001: 41) ²

If restorative nostalgia is trapped in an often-false dream of the past, reflective nostalgia problematizes the past, tries to understand it and move forward

² Nosts from the Greek word for “home” and algia for “pain”.

without forgetting it. History has shown us that attempts to restore the past can be used by forces with a specific political agenda which makes dreams of, for example, Bullerbyn, something to be wary of. Reflecting on the past can, however, be a way to critically examine our nostalgic notions.

Margaret Rose discusses how steampunk often includes a nostalgic remembrance of a time long past but at the same time problematizes stereotypical understanding of, for example, progress and scientific advances (Rose 2009: 330). In "Retrofuturism and steampunk" Elizabeth Goffey and Kate C Lemay argues that both genres can be seen as examples Boym's ideas of reflective nostalgia as they "push our understanding of nostalgia in new directions" (Goffey & Lemay 2014: 442).

Steampunk is a malleable cultured manifestation, but one that, like retrofuturism negotiates a present longing for a historical past; if reimagined with different applications, this past might have yielded an alternate current moment. (Goffey & Lemay 2014: 442).

Steampunk makes a point of remembering the past "wrong". That is an important trope of the genre. In the novels I discuss below, the past is both idealized and critiqued.

A different kind of patriarchy

In steampunk romance the world in the nineteenth century and onwards is both similar and different from our contemporary world. Novels that take place in the 1850s, for example, often describe a world where a society divided by class, gender, and race, but where some individuals have the possibility to transgress these divisions. In Kate Cross *Heart of Brass* heroine Arden is a typical strong female heroine who has managed for years on her own after her husband Luke is believed to have been killed in action. Luke has been imprisoned and tortured for years by evil forces making him forget his wife, but he manages to escape and slowly regains his memories. Arden is happy to be reunited with him, but not ready to give up her independence. "So, I am very sorry, my lord, but for years I have lived by no other counsel than my own. I am not about to give my free will over to a man who has forgotten more about me than he knows" (Cross 2012a: 200). During their years apart, Arden has grown strong and independent. She has come to realize that she is capable not only to survive on her own but to build a successful career. Arden is an inventor who not only builds weapons for the Wardens, a secret society that protects England, but has also invented a vibrator that London's upper-class women are very fond of. "Best of all was the design. If anyone saw it, they might think it an odd piece of jewellery or a trinket, unless they had one of their own. It was certainly more subtle than a brass phallus", (Cross 2012a: 108). In this version of a Victorian society, upper-class women can buy themselves a vibrator, but in secret. Imagining a vibrator in Victorian times not only provides an anachronistic bridge to today, but also highlights

female sexuality. In Cross' version of the 1850s the stereotypical idea that upper-class women did not have any sexual longings and should "lie back and think of England" is disputed. The demand for Arden's invention becomes a comment on women's right to sexual pleasure.

The steampunk heroine is often strong and capable. In *Touch of Steel*, the heroine Claire, a trained assassin is described as: "She wasn't overly soft, but she was firm and strong, and there was nothing demure about her" (Cross 2012b: 83). Claire is ruthless and violent, but has, what is often described as a more gentle and feminine side. Her work often puts her in danger and she faces perils that her male colleagues does not. Claire is, for example, equipped with an "anti-conception device".

The Coppering or Anti-Conception Device was mandatory for every female field-agent. It was an understood fact that many female agents used their feminine charms to get close to a target, which made the protection necessary. Unfortunately, it was also understood that female agents were occasionally the victims of sexual violence, which also made the device necessary. (Cross 2012b: 225)

Even if both Arden and Claire live in a society which makes it possible for them to have successful careers defending the nation, the England they inhabit is still a patriarchal society, where women are regularly threatened with sexual violence. Whether male characters also faces these threats are not visible in my material.

In Gail Carrigan's *Prudence* the heroine refuses to marry and runs away when she inherits a flying steamship, "The Spotted Custard". Not only does Prudence come from a wealthy family, but she also has supernatural traits that can be used for defence. Her escape, however, is made possible by her steamship being what can only be described non-threatening. "If two young ladies of high society showed up on one's tower claiming a pleasure tour, it was more believable if their dirigible looked like an enormous friendly beetle", (Carriger 2015:110). The world that Prudence and her friend Primrose inhabits has strict rules for upper-class young women, but these rules can be circumvented. As I discuss below, the fact that these characters are upper-class also makes it possible for them to take liberties with society's rules. They are privileged women which makes it possible for them to have the kind of adventures that they have. But even with their social position, these female characters are vulnerable. In steampunk romance there are several aspects where the gender structures of Victorian society are reimagined, but the world is still dangerous for the women who inhabit it.

There is something ambivalent in how these strong female heroines are described in steampunk romance. They are often physically strong, several of them are engineers and many have supernatural traits, but they are also described as very feminine with a particular interest on clothes, and they are often clad in a corset. The corset has a special place in steampunk as it for

many fictional characters as, for example, Finley in Cady Cross' *The Girl in the Steel Corset*. There are several scenes in the novel which describe how Finley is dressed where a corset plays a significant part. When Finley, who is a strong fighter with a pendant for violence, meets Emily, an engineer, Emily makes a special corset for her.

A steel corset – thin, shiny bands with embossed flowers and leaves, held together with tiny hinges to allow ease of movement. Little gears and other decorative pieces of steel were soldered over some of the larger gaps between bands. The garment looked like an industrial metal flower garden. (Cross 2012c: 265)

The corset protects Finley from both bullets and knives but is also beautiful and "feminine" with lots of flower. This can be interpreted as a kind of reconstruction of traditional views on femininity, but can also be seen as an example of what Kathryn James discusses in *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*. She argues that even if YA literature often portrays strong female protagonists, these heroines are usually described in a way to make them less subversive, less threatening. They "are repeatedly depicted in a way which either undermines their strength and independence or tears down their tough and aggressive image to reveal the 'real' woman underneath" (James 2009:166).

Finley is an interesting character. Even if Arden and Claire, the heroines previously presented, are described as strong and fully capable to use a gun or knife, Finley uses her fists and fights in a more physical way. Arden's position of power is based on her expertise as an inventor and Claire's on her ability for being covert and her intelligence, Finley is a fighter. In Cross' novel Finley is often described as longing to be more feminine and the more violent part of her frightens her. She is an example of a character that transgresses gender stereotypes but at the same time embodies traditional gender traits.

The corset is important in steampunk. There is even a "Corset Manifesto" written by Katherine Casey where she states: "We stand before women who broke their ribs for beauty. Now, we shall lace our corsets only as tight as we want to, able to breathe deeply as we prepare for adventure that will take our breath away" (Casey 2009). The corset becomes a tool, a garment that allows for a kind of transformation. Julie Ann Taddeo argues in "Corsets of Steel: Steampunk's Reimagining of Victorian Femininity" that the corset is described in the genre as something that gives the female characters strength. "Rather than an instrument of torture and disempowerment, the corset enabled women to manipulate and define their own femininity", (Taddeo 2014:44). There are several ambiguities regarding the corset in steampunk, connected not only to images of "femininity" but also of class. With very few exceptions the heroines in steampunk romance are upper-class women who are able to transgress the boundaries that restrict their behaviour.

If there is an abundance of female characters in steampunk romance that tries to break free from constricting gender patterns, what about the male characters? The trope that the female heroine is unsatisfied with her limited options in society and rebels against them, as Honoria does in Bec McMaster's *Kiss of Steel*, is one that is common also in historical romance. In McMaster's novel Honoria meets Blade, a king in the under-world, inhabited not only by human beings with mechanical body parts, but also by vampires and werewolves. As she teaches him to be a "gentleman", she gains strength to rebel against the rules she is taught to obey. In both steampunk romance and historical romance there are many young women who are described as not "fitting" in, who refuses to accept their limited options and who rebel, a rebellion that is often made possible by the hero. He is often the loner, the tortured Byronic soul who has given up on love but finds it as he meets this unique woman whose strength he admires (Nilson 2015: 63-79). A similar hero can be found in Kate Locke's *God save the Queen*, where the hero Vex is not just a werewolf but also a Scot³ who after a few misunderstandings begin to admire Xandra's violent tendencies (Locke 2012). In these novels the hero is a rather traditional "alpha" male kind of character (Donald 1992). This kind of hero is a very common character in historical romance and is an interestingly ambivalent one. He is a version of "Superman", vastly superior all other men, but also vulnerable and misunderstood. In a world of patriarchal men who all wants to maintain the status quo, he is the only one who appreciates the heroines attempts to at least challenge gender norms.

In the novels discussed here, there are several characters that fit this pattern, but also a few exceptions. One is Perry from Gail Carriger's series "The Custard Protocol". He is described as a sensitive and thoughtful man that does not like to fight and prefers to solve a problem in a library. Another example is Griffin in Kady Cross' *The Girl in the Steel Corset*. Where the heroine Finley is the one who is a strong and capable fighter, Griffin can manipulate "ether" and even if his ability often helps the gang to solve mysteries and deal with dangerous situations, it is often Finley's fists that saves the day.

It is safe to say that steampunk romance provides an often traditional view of masculinity, something that is also true for a lot of category romance, like Mills & Boon and Harlequin (Allan 2020). When trying to envision a Victorian society with different gender structures, the novels focus on the female characters who are allowed to break free from stereotypes to a much higher degree than the male characters.

³ This is a common combination in steampunk romance. In Gail Carriger's "The Parasol Protectorate" the hero Lord Maccon is also a werewolf and a Scot.

Upstairs and downstairs – about class

The steampunk romance novels discussed in this article all portray upper-class characters. The fact that the steampunk heroine so often is clad in a corset is but one sign of this, as working-class women of course did not wear corsets. As discussed above, the agency the heroine has in these novels is very often connected to her privileged position.

Being an upper-class character gives the heroines an advantage. In Cross' novel, for example, Arden can work as an agent and an inventor because of her position in society. Being a "lady" gives her not just an agency, but also a power over those below her in the societal hierarchy.

"Being the considerate gentleman he was, Inspector Grant could not refuse a lady's request – specially not the request of such a high-ranking lady as a countess", (Cross 2012a: 115).

In the novel, Arden is often surrounded by characters who are trying to maintain the structures of a Victorian society. This sometimes hinders her as she refuses to bow down to traditional gender structures, but sometimes it works to her advantage.

There are few main working-class characters in steampunk romance, but they do exist. In Cassandra Clare's *Clockwork Princess*, the third novel in the YA-series "The Infernal Devices", the housemaid Sophie has to point out to the upper-class hero Gideon that she has a completely different life than he has. Being born into a privileged position, Gideon does not see how class differentiates people. He is interested in Sophie and often longs for her company, and so he asks for scones that he does not eat, forcing her to visit his rooms in the attic again and again. When Sophie realizes that he just throws the scones away, she is furious.

Do you have any idea how much work I have to do, Mr. Lightwood? Carrying coal and hot water, dusting, polishing, cleaning up after *you* and the others – and I don't mind and complain, but how dare you make extra work for me, make me drag heavy trays up and down stairs, just to bring you something you didn't even want? (Clare 2015: 91)

Gideon slowly develops an understanding of his privileged position and a happy ending for the couple is made possible when Sophie becomes a "shadow-hunter", same as Gideon and goes from being his servant to being his equal.

In Gail Carriger's Young Adult series "Finishing School" the heroine Sophronia is sent to a boarding school where she learns not just proper etiquette, but also learns how to shoot and poison enemies of the realm in order to become a spy. She meets Soap, a so-called "sootie" that spends his day shuffling coal in the basement of the school. He is a working-class boy and black, and Sophronia knows that a relationship between them is impossible. In *Waistcoats and Weaponry* Soap starts to long for a different

existence and one way to break out from being what he is, is to become a werewolf. Werewolves lives in packs with their own hierarchies. Sophronia is worried that he might not survive the transformation, but Soap argues that “it’s not like I’d have a long, healthy life as a sootie”, (Carriger 2014:61). For them to have a life together, they both need to break free from the life they lead. Soap becomes a werewolf and Sophronia a “free agent”, leaving her upper-class world behind. There is no place in the Victorian society envisioned for the couple, so they have to leave it in order to have their happily-ever-after.

There is an ambivalence in mainstream steampunk when dealing with class. Roland says in his introduction to steampunk that:

And while it may be true that the real Victorians were not too kind to criminals, widows, and orphans, locking spare wives in the attic, confining the poor to the workhouse, putting debtors in the quad and transporting convicts to the colonies, it must be said in their defence that they had impeccable manners. And that lost art is something steampunks take particular pride in. (Roland 2014: 13)

Even if this is, of course, an ironic statement, it says something interesting. In all the novels discussed in this article there exists a critique of the society described but also a nostalgic longing for it. Cross’, Carriger’s and McMasters’ heroines rebel against their upper-class upbringing, but are able to do so because of it. And even if the steampunk version of a Victorian society is different from the one, we know from the history books, several aspects of it are the same. Maybe it becomes impossible to imagine a world with afternoon tea, extravagant corsets, and polite conversation without a rigorous class system? There is a nostalgic longing in these books which is often visible in the long descriptions of extravagant dresses or elegant balls. A kind of longing that could be seen as restorative with Boym’s definitions. But there is also an effort to imagine a Victorian past as something else. By creating a fictional world where women have more opportunities, the past is critiqued in a way that borders on what Boym calls reflective nostalgia. The longing for the past is still there but a different past where at least a few of the injustices of both yesterday and today is addressed.

The exotic women in steampunk

There is a critique of patriarchal power structures in steampunk romance but there are also a visible discussion on race and sexuality which is a bit more ambiguous. In Cross’ *Heart of Brass* the Wardens are run by Dhanya, a woman from India. On one level this of course opens a discussion on colonialism and race as the power structures of the Britain described in the novel are very different from the actual 1850s, but the way that the novel describes her is problematic. ”Her thick hair was coiled into a large, heavy bun at the base of her skull, and large, piercing amber eyes stared out of a face that was just a little too dark and exotic to be wholly English” (Cross 2012a:

53). The word "exotic" is very frequently used to describe female characters who are not white in steampunk romance. In Cross' *Touch of Steel* Dr. Stone is introduced. She is a female mechanic from Africa. "Dr Stone was as exotic as Cleopatra herself" (Cross 2012b: 76). And in Carrigan's *Imprudence*, Tasherit, a were-woman from Egypt, joins the crew of the Spotted Custard and "[s]he was so beautiful it hurt, like breathing deep on an icy evening. She was all exotically strong features, tea-with-milk complexion, and long, thick dark hair" (Carriger 2016: 27). Tasherit is a strong character who falls in love with Prudence's friend Primrose, making them one of the few non heterosexual couples I have found in mainstream steampunk romance, but the way she is described can maybe be seen as an example of how difficult it can be to break free from stereotypical images that we have lived with for a very long time. In discussing Susan Price's fantasy novels, Sanna Lehtonen argues that Price present different and subversive images of gender but falls into what Lehtonen calls a trap of describing race in a not only traditional but very limited way (Lehtonen 2010). The indigenous people in Prices books often becomes a homogenous group that all share the same beliefs and customs (Lehtonen 2010: 12). Critically examining structures and how they intersect with each other is difficult and to fall back to traditional and stereotypical ideas that one has been subjected to is always a danger.

Diana M. Pho argues in "Punking the Other: On the Performance of Racial and National Identities in Steampunk" that it is a challenge to combine a nostalgic longing back to the Victorian era with, for example, a critique of colonialism. In trying to create an alternate history, there is danger of reproducing stereotypes and instead strengthening the norms and ideal one wants to challenge, but she still sees a potential in the genre. One example is the way that steampunk can problematize national identity.

Beyond simple designations of nostalgia or subversion, however, steampunk participants frequently (but not always) explore the complicated intersections of racial and national hybridity, fracturing any notions of a homogenous national culture and dismantling historical narratives. (Pho 2016: 128)

Pho sees a possibility that speculative fiction such as steampunk can by imagining a different past, at least make us aware of the challenges of remembering the past (who's?) and trying to embrace a different future.

A new past?

The novels discussed can all be seen as a blend of restorative and reflective nostalgia. There is a longing for a past where the power structures a woman (at least an upper-class woman) needs to fight are clearly visible and portrayed as possible to overcome. This can be seen as dangerously restorative as the longing for a "simpler" past always come laden with perils, but there is also an opening to something else. In steampunk romance there is an overall theme that women should have had these opportunities, that a woman from India

should be able to lead an important organization keeping England safe and that it should be possible to break rules and imagine a different path for oneself. If I may generalize, I would say that a lot of mainstream steampunk has the individual in focus, and not society at large. There is, what we could call, a “girl-power” layer to the novels discussed here. Heroines like Arden and Prudence are critical to the society they live in and its rules for women. They refuse to adapt and limit themselves and can achieve the freedom to make their own choices. But there is seldom in these novels a discussion about changing the society for every woman, man or “sootie”. In *Feminism Inc.* Emelie Zaslow argues that

Girl power focuses on style as a mark of one’s autonomy, on sexual expressions as a symbol of one’s connection with the self, on independence from men rather than from patriarchal systems and relations of power, and on the individual as independent resister rather than as a member of collective social change movement. (Zaslow 2009: 150)

These novels express the need for change and the possibility for change, but almost always for the individual. Maybe this is because imagining an equal and just society is too difficult today as we see very few examples of utopias? Creating individuals who are able to transgress integrated societal power structures might be easier and seen as a “quick fix”, but even if the societies in the novels discussed in this article have many flaws, there is a suggestion in them that the world could be different.

One of the recurring ingredients in steampunk is the idea that the past could have been different. The thousands of years of injustices and oppression that our history consists of, could have been an “other” history. But there are of course dangers to imagining a different past, as this has been and still is a tool that is used by those with authority to make events or people etcetera that somehow threaten a specific world view invisible. Boym argues that restorative nostalgia can be a powerful weapon in the hands of, for example, a totalitarian regime. “Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters” (Boym 2001: xvi). This kind of nostalgia can easily become a threat, but nostalgia as a whole can be a useful tool. But even if there are dangers, Boym sees a potential force in reflective nostalgia. “Nostalgia can be both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure” (Boym 2001: 354). Reflective nostalgia embraces the longing back but forces us to question our cultural memories and critically imagine the past. And maybe fiction can help us to this? Maybe Cassidy in the Star Trek: Deep Space 9 episode has a point. To imagine history as it could, should or might have been is never without its perils, but maybe it can be a way for us to move forward towards something else.

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