It Walks in Beauty: Selected Prose of Chandler Davis
edited and with an introduction by Josh Lukin


REVIEWED BY ANN HIBNER KOBLITZ

In his afterword to It Walks in Beauty Josh Lukin notes, "Hagiography is hard to avoid with a figure who combines a history of suffering with admirable artistic, scientific, and political accomplishment; but it’s a very risky approach to a person—not least because of the perils of disappointment" (p. 348). This volume contains a number of Chan Davis's political essays, science-fiction stories, poetry, and interviews, and Intelligencer readers may rest easy—the collection does not disappoint. The materials included here represent a broad cross-section of Davis's nonmathematical writings dating back to 1949. Among many other topics, Davis writes about his 1954 dismissal from the University of Michigan for refusing to answer questions posed by the House Un-American Activities Committee and his subsequent imprisonment, his more than six decades of progressive politics, and his dealings with and opinions about his fellow science-fiction writers in the 1940s and 1950s.

For me, Davis’s science-fiction stories and his discussions of the Vanguard Amateur Press Association (VAPA) were a highlight of the volume. The majority of science-fiction writers of Davis’s generation conceived of the future as, in feminist science-fiction writer Joanna Russ’s memorable formulation, a "galactic suburbia" populated largely by brilliant white male scientists and engineers on the one hand and beautiful-but-dimwitted white female housewives on the other. Non-WASPs (shorthand for “white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants”) tended to make brief appearances either as comic relief (complete with ethnic accents and working-class jobs) or as villains. Davis had a different vision. In his 1949 “Critiques & Proposals” Davis urged his VAPA colleagues to defy racist and sexist stereotypes: “Let your … hero be Negro; let his buddy be Chinese or East Indian” (p. 56). True, most editors would be reluctant to allow these departures from conventional whiteness, Davis admitted; for example, a sympathetically drawn physicist who in Davis’s manuscript was black had references to his race expunged in the published story. And “I don’t know any market except for leftist magazines or arty ones where a Negro hero would be allowed to get the girl if she was white” (p. 57). Still, Davis exhorted his friends to persevere:
Write a story that will give a few bigots the jolt they need. Write a story that will open the eyes of the unconsciously bigoted. Write a story that will compensate, for some Negro reader, for the insults he's taken from white people in just the day preceding.

Remember that the large majority of your readers—the large majority—either discriminate or are discriminated against; keep that in mind all the time. Then write a story that satisfies your conscience (pp. 59-60; italics his).

Most people might associate sentiments of this sort with the progressive movements of the 1960s and early 1970s more than with the 1940s. But one point that Davis makes repeatedly in the essays and interviews in It Walks in Beauty is that the left has been involved in antiracist, antifascist, and antisexit protest for a hundred years. To take a small number of examples: in the 1930s, communist-led labor unions were often the only ones that allowed membership by African Americans and other people of color. In the late 1930s, my mother-in-law Minnie Koblitz was a counselor in the only interracial summer camp in Ohio; needless to say, it was run by communists. And in 1949, Marxist mathematician Lee Lorch and progressive labor activists in the teamsters' union were zealous advocates of housing integration in New York City.

Mainstream scholars have often ignored or distorted this history. The longstanding activism of people on the left has for the most part been airbrushed out of the history of civil rights, women's liberation, and other pioneering movements aiming to achieve social justice. For example, in its article marking 60 years since Lorch's fight to integrate low-income housing in Manhattan, The New York Times went through considerable contortions to avoid mentioning the leftist political orientation of the fair-housing advocates.1

Chandler Davis has no patience with this type of historical amnesia about the vanguard role of the left in culture as well as in politics in the first half of the 20th century. He takes pains to make visible the communist and socialist activism of earlier decades, and he emphasizes the long-ranging influences that the left culture of the 1930s had on him and other young intellectuals. This is a major point throughout It Walks in Beauty, and it is reinforced in Josh Lukin's thoughtful introductory and concluding essays.

Davis’s friends and colleagues in VAPA and the wider science-fiction community of the mid-20th century included Frederik Pohl, James Blish, Judith Merril, Virginia Kidd, Theodore Sturgeon, and Damon Knight—luminaries whose names are familiar to anyone who reads “Golden Age” science fiction. Less well known might be the fact that they identified themselves as socialists, leftists, communists, and Trotskyites, and they formed part of what Davis calls “the New York Science Fiction Left Intellectual group” (p. 297). His accounts of this group are fascinating and are one of my favorite parts of the volume.

The centerpiece of It Walks in Beauty is the five science-fiction stories. The title story “It Walks in Beauty” is a skillful and disturbing critique of 1950s sex roles; “Adrift on the Policy Level” and “The Statistomat Pitch” are brilliant dystopic visions of near-future corporate capitalism gone mad; “The Names of Yanils” is a sensitive analysis of social change within a “traditional” culture; and “Last Year's Grave Undug” is a haunting depiction of friendship and struggle in a post-apocalyptic, paranoid, Red-scare-gone-wild United States. None of the stories are simple, and none have “they lived happily ever after” endings. None have heroes (although they have protagonists), and none have villains other than sexism, anticommunist paranoia, corporate greed, complacency, ignorance, and so forth. All of the stories grapple seriously with complex issues, and none take place in galactic suburbia.

“It Walks in Beauty” is the story that is often identified as an early statement of Davis’s feminist principles. In the world of the story, women are divided into two groups: alluring, exaggeratedly feminine sirens who have entertainment houses that their adoring male fans patronize in hopes of being chosen as the favored lover for a while; and no-nonsense, short-haired, boyish-looking career-line females who are referred to as “it” instead of “she.” The male protagonist finds himself having feelings for Paula, one of the “its,” but given his rigidly sexist socialization he can’t come to terms with his sentiments toward someone his culture tells him is not an appropriate love object. Even after Paula demonstrates to him that the differences between “it” and the sirens are more a matter of the sirens’ longhaired wigs, makeup, and stereotypically vampy mannerisms than anything intrinsic, he still can’t bring himself to see Paula in a romantic light.

Science-fiction stories written half a century ago can’t fail to include some phrases or notions that grate on the sensibilities of modern readers (witness a couple of the terms in Davis’s previously cited quotes), but in Davis’s fiction these moments are rare. In fact, it is possible to read “It Walks in Beauty” as a story with homoerotic overtones, because the protagonist’s attraction to Paula is most acknowledged when “it” is dressed as a boy, and Davis hints that from the protagonist’s perspective, Paula’s pseudo- boyishness might be part of “its” allure.

Like most of his VAPA peers, and like many writers before and since, Davis used science-fiction as a tool for social and cultural critique, as a creative way of lampooning the flaws of society and indicating that alternative forms of social organization were thinkable, if only in the far future. Unlike most of his fellow writers, especially those outside of the Left Intellectual group, Davis combines his fiction writing with more than six decades of political activism. Thus, It Walks in Beauty makes inspiring reading.

A final note: It Walks in Beauty was published by Aqueduct Press, a small feminist press based in Seattle and founded by the brilliant science-fiction writer and essayist L. Timmel Duchamp and her mathematician husband Tom Duchamp. Aqueduct’s lists are phenomenal. Their authors include world-renowned luminaries such as Ursula K. LeGuin and Tiptree Award winners such as Gwyneth Jones, Nisi Shawl, and Andrea Hairston. The press issues the WisCon Chronicles


2The Tiptree Awards, for the best science fiction with a feminist or gendered theme, were named in honor of James Tiptree, Jr. (also known as Alice Sheldon or Raccoona Sheldon), a feminist author who published much of her award-winning science fiction under a male pseudonym.