

4th Street Convention Panel

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Casey Blair: [00:00:02] Hello, I'm Casey Blair, the programming director for 4th Street Fantasy and you are listening to our special 2020 podcast edition of 4th Street Fantasy. And our topic today is the fantasy feast, or the same old magic immediate road stew with panelists Elizabeth Bear, Fonda Lee, DongWon Song, Ruthanna Emrys, and surprise me. Blair McGregor was sadly unable to join us today so I will be filling in.

[00:00:26] And we're going to run this as much like a 4th Street panel as we can. So once our panelists have taken it away for a while, Scott Lynch may jump in at the end with a couple of audience questions.

[00:00:36] So without further ado, let's turn it over to today's moderator, Elizabeth Bear.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:00:40] Hello everybody. Thank you panelists for being here. Thank you Casey, for stepping in at the last minute. First I would like to ask everybody to introduce themselves. Starting with Casey, since she was just talking.

Casey Blair: [00:00:57] Hello again. I'm still Casey Blair. I am a fantasy novelist. My web serial, Tea Princess Chronicles is available online and I also have a novella out called Consider the Dust.

DongWon Song: [00:01:12] Hi, I'm DongWon Song. Sorry, I think, we're... are we still going with introductions here?

Elizabeth Bear: [00:01:17] Yes.

DongWon Song: [00:01:17] Hi, I'm DongWon Song. I'm a literary agent with the Howard Morhaim Literary Agency. I represent science fiction and fantasy for adult, middle grade and YA audiences.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:01:29] I am Elizabeth Bear. I write science fiction and fantasy and anything else I can get my hands on. My most recent novel. Actually, my next forthcoming novel is Machine, which will be out from Saga and Gollancz in the fall. It is a space opera set in a hospital which sort of accidentally involves an epidemic. It's... yeah. I didn't plan it that way. I guess, Fonda!

Fonda Lee: [00:02:05] Hi everyone. I'm Fonda Lee. I am the author of the Green Bone Saga an epic urban fantasy Asian-inspired gangster family drama.

That is mouthful that I go through a lot. I am also the author of the young adult science fiction novels Zeroboxer, Exo and Crossfire and I love food. So I'm looking forward to this panel.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:02:30] Hi, I'm Ruthanna Emrys. I'm an author of fantasy and science fiction. I have two historical fantasy novels out, Winter Tide and Deep Roots. There's a lot of food in them and my short story collection, Impefect Commentaries includes some of the recipes for some of the food in those feasts because that counts as a short story now.

Fonda Lee: [00:02:56] Nice.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:02:59] So to start us off, I'm going to go in with a very general question. What does food in fantasy and science fiction mean to you, personally? What is the context, the personal context that you bring to this discussion? Feel free to raise your hands. Dead silent, oh! DongWon.

DongWon Song: [00:03:33] You know, I think as the child of immigrants, I think food has such an important way that we sort of perpetuate and communicate our culture. Our history of who we are and our connection to where our parents came from, where our families came from, is really told through the story of food, right? And where ingredients come from, how ingredients travel, how we prepare them. All those things, you can really map the movements of people, whether that was immigration, whether that was forced situations, things like that. And the colonization, empire, all of that is really visible in food, so I love to see that played out in fiction, especially fantasy, which plays with so many themes of colonization and imperialism and war.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:04:27] Very true. Fonda?

Fonda Lee: [00:04:27] Well, one thing that I think fantasy really does is expand our imagination. So we're imagining riding dragons or summoning the dead or casting spells. And food, though, is something that's so inherently relatable to the human experience that in many ways it grounds fantasy. So it is this worldbuilding tool that is, that's so just common to all of us that you can have the characters do absolutely anything and then it still comes down to sitting down with your bowl of stew or having a meal together with your family.

[00:05:08] And especially in the context of meals, which we're talking about on this panel. Meals are indicative of togetherness. So in fantasy fiction they are this opportunity to bring your characters together and really showcase the relationships between them and the cultural context that they're in. And they can be these really pivotal narrative moments.

[00:05:36] When I was thinking ahead about this panel before we got on the call, I was trying to sort of take stock of how many meals I have written into my fantasy trilogy and I couldn't, because there are a lot. A lot of meals, and they end up being these moments where major decisions are made in the story, including like, how this family's going to go to war and who they're going to assassinate. And that just, for me, creates this sense of domesticity and relatableness to the characters.

[00:06:09] If you go to any, especially as an Asian American, every family event is centered around food. If I go visit my uncle, he's for sure taking us out for a meal and there's a lot of significance as to which restaurant he's taking us to and the fact that he's going to host and there's going to be a fight over the check. Those things are sort of given. And that's just sort of this layer of the social realism that I want to layer into fantasy fiction.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:06:45] Ruthanna?

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:06:45] I like both what DongWon said about food as indicator for the history of the world and where the characters come from, and then what Fonda said about it being characterization, the choices that you make in the moment. And I'm thinking about food as a worldbuilding choice for how individuals interact with it. Food is, it carries so many memories in the difference between what it's like to try something new versus to have comfort food from your childhood. You can use that to show what people are thinking about. It's an opportunity for backstory and the way people react to something that's so sensorially intense.

[00:07:50] Working with taste and smell makes a world feel so much more lived in. And then the other thing I'm thinking about is food as social glue. And that we do, we make decisions around meals. We bring food into meetings and negotiations to indicate that there's something real and important going on there. The novel that I'm currently working on is sort of a science fiction novel of manners and so every time I hit a conflict, I'm like, how can I fit in a fraught dinner party here? [Inaudible [00:08:40] is fraught about this fraught dinner party? Is the choice of food? Is it how the food is served? Is it cultural conflicts over what food means what?

Elizabeth Bear: [00:08:57] Yeah. You're actually making me think of the various different ways that food and enchantment go together in fantasy literature. I'm thinking of Sorcery and Cecelia, The Enchanted Chocolate Pot versus the food in Harry Potter, for example, that just appears magically, or the sort of cursed Turkish delight in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:09:27] Any story with fae realms, where if you eat the food then that changes you.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:09:33] Exactly. And I'd like to come back to talking about that a little bit once Casey gets her say. Because I saw you had your hand up.

Casey Blair: [00:09:41] I'm kind of cheating, since I came up with the panel topic, but what I really wanted to talk about is, I'm so used to talking about food in fantasy as the worldbuilding element, which it absolutely is. But there's so much that happens in fantasy that's not just about the culture of cooking, but of eating and of how we share food together.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:10:04] Mm-hmm.

Casey Blair: [00:10:04] It's not just revealing worldbuilding. It reveals character because if you understand what the culture is in the fantasy world, or don't, then people will behave differently. And it's how people interact with the food and the eating together that you can do so much with. And fantasy in particular, has this reputation for these lavish feasts for the stew that everyone eats immediately...

Elizabeth Bear: [00:10:34] We're the genre with cookbooks.

Casey Blair: [00:10:38] Yes. And I think you can't separate, because of course, there's no reason that food shouldn't be in every book. But fantasy has such a reputation for these kinds of meal gatherings that I kind of wanted to talk about how that is part of not just the worldbuilding of the food itself of the culture of eating together and what fantasy novelists are doing with that.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:11:02] So...

DongWon Song: [00:11:02] Well, one thing I wanted to pick up on, of sorry. Just one thing I wanted to pick up on. Oh, sorry.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:11:04] I was just... Go ahead, DongWon.

DongWon Song: [00:11:06] Oh, go on. Sorry, Bear. Go. You go.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:11:09] All I was going to say was that my actual next question was can we talk about meals as a tool to reveal culture, culture, climate, and character? So, Casey is reading my mind.

DongWon Song: [00:11:22] Perfect.

Casey Blair: [00:11:22] You're welcome.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:11:24] Go, DW.

DongWon Song: [00:11:26] Well, one thing I think about a lot is the way that food can be, and this really picks up on Casey, what you were saying right there. That food is worldbuilding not just in a material sense, right? There is the material sense of these are the cooking techniques. These are the ingredients that are available to them. But so much of worldbuilding isn't necessarily about the physical elements, but about the rules of your world, right? What is important to people that exist in this society? What are the social mores? What are the dynamics? And those elements can tell you so much about what people value, right? If you're having a very formal, sit-down dinner, then that tells you a lot about what kind of story that we're getting into and what kind of world that we're in.

[00:12:10] Or going to something that Fonda mentioned, right, if there's fighting over the check at the end of the meal, then that tells you a lot about the dynamics of that family, that tells you about character, but it also tells you about what's important to them. What's important to them is this sort of economy of graciousness, this economy of who is taking who out to dinner and those kind of elements, right?

[00:12:29] So when I think about how, and that's why I really like that this panel was framed around meals rather than just food. What does the meal mean in a fantasy novel? And there's such rich opportunity to layer in all of these different elements of the story you're trying to tell, the characters you're trying to build. And the world you're really showing us.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:12:49] So, bouncing off of DW, there, why don't we talk a little bit about fighting over the check as a way of showing character, and sort of, in some cases, showing social dominance, even. What are some other character-revealing moments that center around meals? Unless you have something else you want to do first, Fonda?

Fonda Lee: [00:13:15] What, I actually have something I can say about both of those things.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:13:19] Okay.

Fonda Lee: [00:13:19] Because we were, DongWon was talking about behavior around meals and I was thinking about some of the ways that meals can be used in narrative, to also kind of advance, not just character, but also the storyline as a whole. And one of the things that occurred to me was we have a lot of holidays, celebrations, pivotal social moments that are around, that are really centered around food. Like, Thanksgiving comes around once a year. Easter has got its own special meal. Christmas has

got its own special meal. And that's one way that, as writers, we can also highlight what's important to this culture that is revolving around these set times in a year that people are expected to get together. And what are the traditions that are expected there?

[00:14:17] And it's a way to also create a sense of continuity. So, in my novels, there's certain holidays that come around every year. And if you're showing those over time, it's a way that you can also show how those characters change over time. And it creates a sense of narrative resonance, like, oh, this was what this meal was like New Year's two years ago, and here we are with these same characters, New Year's two years later, and how the dynamics have changed between those characters.

Casey Blair: [00:14:52] If you can establish the precedent for what the meal looked like at one point and then show a similar meal later, or the same characters sharing a meal later and compare them to them, that's a really great narrative tool.

Fonda Lee: [00:15:03] Right. And then, getting kind of to your point, Bear, about certain customs, like fighting over the check. One thing that I've found to be a great little way to distinguish different cultures within the same fantasy world is showing how there's miscommunication or just lack of understanding, or just differences in custom when people of different cultures eat together.

[00:15:31] So if you have characters... so, for example, in one of my cultures, in my novels, typically if you're at a business dinner, you take the time to sort of talk about anything other than business until the meal is done. And then you've established this relationship with the people and then business starts happening. As opposed to another culture where that's not the norm, and people start talking business right away as soon as the appetizers come up.

[00:15:56] So that's a way of showing, or differentiating between cultures within the same fantasy world and potentially creating understanding or misunderstanding.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:16:07] Okay. Ruthanna's been super patient. Go for it.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:16:11] No, but that's a good segue, because one of the cultural differences that I was thinking about that can also end up being something that gets used for power plays or showing hierarchies is the culture of who decides what the food is and how you're supposed to handle mismatches between that and what other people can eat or want

to eat. And this is something that shows up in real life where you have cultures that assume that everyone is hungry and therefore if you have guests coming over, you want them to tell you exactly what their food preferences are so you can make something that they really genuinely like, versus cultures that assume that the food is there basically as a social prop and that if somebody doesn't like it, they'll have eaten earlier or later. And so, the idea is that the host decides what the food is and other people work around that and would never dream of expressing that they have any sort of preferences around food or need to eat right now.

[00:17:25] And this is something that I have bumped into especially when I first started dating my now wife who is from one of the latter cultures and I am from one of the former cultures and so we had very different expectations about, for example, who should say it's time to eat and what you do if there's literally nothing you can eat at a table and we had some fraught dinner parties.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:17:56] Oh, yeah. Casey?

Casey Blair: [00:18:00] I think the other thing to consider, when we're talking about culture, is that it's not necessarily always just geographical culture, right? There's also class. And so you can have a family dinner with two people, with a group of people who live in fairly close proximity and if it's a formal dinner and somebody doesn't know how to behave, then you can do a whole lot with people's reactions. Are they subtly judging this person for not knowing the cues, are they actively including them? And I think you can use the meals to communicate—it's a very efficient way to communicate a whole lot at once. On worldbuilding, on plot, based on the choices those characters make. That gives you, it's a really efficient way to give you a lot of information about the world and the story at once because we all understand sharing meals with other people. So any deviations or similarities kind of give us a point of reference to ease into the world.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:19:08] Yeah. I'm also thinking of, you just made me think of food and meals as social gate-keeping. The formal Victorian dinner with the bewildering array of silverware and glasses. The entire point of that is to make people who don't belong feel out of place.

[00:19:30] Fonda?

Fonda Lee: [00:19:30] I just thought of a short story by Tina Connolly, *The Last Banquet of Temporal Confections* that does a really great job of showcasing this power play within the context of a meal, because

basically the entire short story is framed around a meal. But it's a despotic ruler who has all these people come to this great banquet and serves these magical pastries. And that is a way of essentially re-iterating, reinforcing his power over these people. And this act of rebellion that is the main plot point of the story hinges around undermining that power in the context of a meal. So meals are very much a place where you have social power structures at play. It could be within the family, it could be at a court or at some other large gathering. And I think, also, meals are generally considered safe, right? You have to be relaxed to kind of sit down with people and share food with them. So all the potential dangers that could happen at a meal in fantasy fiction are like, heightened because of this assumption that if you're sitting down to have a meal, it should be safe.

[00:21:00] Think about the shock of the Red Wedding, the idea that you're being hosted by these people and you're putting trust into them and how could they betray you?

Elizabeth Bear: [00:21:12] Yeah, there's also the power play of forcing people to eat something that's disgusting or taboo or horrific. Which I think also gets used fairly frequently.

[00:21:27] DW?

DongWon Song: [00:21:27] Well, that was an absolutely perfect segue, so thank you for that. You know, one of the things I was thinking about as we were talking, though, is a think that I feel like people... I wish people were little bit more cautious about when writing about food, especially in fantasy and science fiction. And I'm going to criticize some very beloved properties here, so bear with me for a second.

[00:21:49] But specifically what I'm thinking of is the way Klingon food is presented in Star Trek, and on the opposite end of the spectrum, the way Elven food is portrayed in Lord of the Rings. There are these massive cultural assumptions about a culture's validity being made in the way those foods are presented. So Klingons drink blood wine. They eat live grubs, and it's always presented as this very horrifying, disgusting thing. And like, how barbarous an savage the Klingons are, therefore we must go to war with them. They must be opposed to the Federation.

[00:22:22] Or in Lord of the Rings, it's like, oh they have lembas bread. It's this beautiful, delicious, what is effectively a power bar but just tastes good for once. It's... they're presented as this really—

Elizabeth Bear: [00:22:33] What if Clif Bar, but not horrible.

DongWon Song: [00:22:35] Exactly. Exactly. And as a result, the Elves are being presented as this really enlightened, beautiful culture, and it's being communicated through the food. So on one level, I really love that it's being communicated through the food. On the other hand, it's reduced to such a simple valence of good versus bad, and that's where I start to have a problem, right?

[00:22:55] And I'm thinking, there's a scene, I think it's in Star Trek VI where they're having this sort of diplomatic dinner with the Klingons and it is this moment where they're being presented with this disgusting food as a challenge to them. Or I'm thinking of Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, there's the scene where they're served the monkey brains. And it is such this moment of, ooh, look at these foreign weirdos who are doing this gross thing, and therefore they must be the villains here.

[00:23:19] So just be cautious as you're coming into those moments and you're portraying those cultural conflicts. Make sure you're really rooting it in the understanding that it's weird, not because it's weird to us the viewer, but because it's weird to the character in the story who's unfamiliar with it and have a little bit of that distance between you the writer and the character's point of view, if that makes sense?

Elizabeth Bear: [00:23:39] Yeah, absolutely. Casey?

Casey Blair: [00:23:42] That's really making me think about how much, and this is also jumping off of, I think, what Fonda was saying about how much of meal sharing is about hospitality and how much of hospitality is about civilization and our ideas of what civilization is. Because you don't—it is possible to eat without sharing food with another human. So if you're sharing with another person, that implies something about, already, that you believe that sharing food is a thing that is worth doing. And how we present that food to another person, and how we present it to an outsider is also telling. And so, like DongWon is saying, when they show us the Klingons and all of their food looks... they go out of their way to make it look horrifying to a human audience, that is them presenting it to make us feel horrified by this. To make it look like these are not civilized people, they are Other.

[00:24:48] That is a deliberate choice that they're making and I'm actually thinking right now, there's this fantasy romance called Radiance by Grace Draven and the two protagonists, one is human and one is from a non-human culture. And it starts, the first meal you have is at a, it's in the human culture, but it's from the perspective of the non-humans and they are completely grossed out by potatoes. And so you have this really fantastic description of their opinion of what human food is and how

they're absolutely horrified well before you get to the non-human meal gathering. So it starts out with, let's put this in context of what your comfortable food looks like from a different perspective, and how we're going to interact with that.

[Crosstalk: [00:25:31]

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:25:33] We need more about taboos that aren't our taboos around food. Because most cultures do have thing that either you officially aren't allowed to eat or certain sorts of things that are considered to be gross. Even on a lesser level than absolute taboos, what's considered to be a symbol of luxury versus only eat it under absolute duress. Poverty can very dramatically and—

Casey Blair: [00:26:03] And it changes.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:26:05] The old story about lobsters that there used to be limits on how many days a week you could feed your servants lobster.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:26:13] There's also an interesting, we were talking about cultural gatekeeping upper class to lower class. There's also a, you're not good plain folk like us, you eat that fancy stuff.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:26:35] Are you going to come to the county fair and eat the hot dog on a stick?

Elizabeth Bear: [00:26:38] Exactly.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:26:38] If not, we're not going to vote for you.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:26:41] Yeah, precisely. Or I was thinking of the sort of, there's an interesting thing in the American west, which is... Old West, which I've been researching because of the Karen Memory books. Where they had, there were some very fancy restaurants and there was also beans on the trail. And soaked beans not really boiled long enough, yum. So you have that thing where people shift cultural levels within their own lives. They shift cultural contexts and I wonder if there's a way that that, that we can use fantasy literature to bring that up, to sort of show people code switching.

DongWon Song: [00:27:38] Right, well think about how food is used in a presidential campaign, right? Like, there's always those photos of Joe Biden eating an ice cream cone or Pete Buttigieg, like, I can't remember what he was eating. But there was some photo of him eating something, like, it was a chicken wing, and everyone decided this was very funny and weird. And that was the thing that did material damage to his campaign. And it's

really interesting to think that just because portraying a politician as unable to eat a sort of working class food, or to drink a beer with somebody, that's such the thing that we say. Like, oh, I wouldn't want to have a beer with that candidate so they're unfit to be president, which is a wild thing to think. But, you know, you see that all the time.

[00:28:21] Or, on the flip side, you'll see a politician caught out at a five star, Michelin starred restaurant having a very fancy dinner and then that photo will go around and build this other narrative, right?

[00:28:34] So the way food is weaponized in our politics can really teach you a lot about, okay, how do I want to portray this character. How do I make them sympathetic. How do I show what the mores of this world are and if there is this drive to seem like a fellow person with the common man, then that is... think about what they're eating and how they're eating it and who's watching them eat it.

Fonda Lee: [00:28:56] In many ways, food is very tribal. It's a way to distinguish, oh, are you one of us? And that can be used at different times, in different contexts in stories. Because it's not so much. I think we all sort of understand that food is a great way to worldbuild and to add color, but it's not so much the food that's important as the character's reactions to the food that also layer on the significance of scenes where you do have people sitting down together and sharing food.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:29:34] Casey?

Casey Blair: [00:29:34] Yeah, jumping off what DongWon was saying and Fonda was getting to earlier is, I think there's a lot to be said for how we weaponize meal gatherings. Because you can absolutely, when you understand the culture at play, you can use that to manipulate other people, including other characters in your book. So you can use that, therefore, for plot. You can also use it for worldbuilding and character development, but when you have those rules and understand how to manipulate them, or the reader understands enough to understand what you're doing. Because as you say, we do this in politics. If you can get a shot of somebody who looks uncomfortable eating good old fashioned food when that's the crowd they're trying to appeal to, you've made a kind of coup.

[00:30:26] And that's the sort of thing you can use meal gatherings to do, not just as communicating worldbuilding, but actually as action in a way. So not physical fighting necessarily, but as choices that you are actively making that are moving the narrative forward.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:30:44] Tension-building. What are some other unexpected things that you can use meals for?

[00:31:00] Anybody? I know, that one just came out of the blue.

DongWon Song: [00:31:03] I'm trying to think of one unexpected.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:31:04] Well, so you can use meals to expose character. You can use them to show social strata. You can use them to show cultural differences. What are some things you can use them for that, or that you have seen them used for that really struck you as unexpected. Okay, I see Fonda.

DongWon Song: [00:31:29] One thing, oh sorry, go ahead.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:31:31] Hang on. Fonda?

Fonda Lee: [00:31:33] So one thing that I did not initially intend to do when I was writing my books, but that came about really organically in a pleasant way was that having certain settings for meals recur throughout the story created this sense of resonance. So there are certain restaurants in my story where major plot turning points occur and bringing the characters back to that in different context and different ways ended up creating this nice, thematic, circular pattern. Which, there were signature foods that the characters were fond of and seeing them be able to, seeing those show up over and over again in different contexts kind of created this nice way of moving the narrative forward. But a constant sense of return, if you will.

[00:32:40] So you see this restaurant kind of go through the ages as things change in the city, until, I think, because you think about family gatherings and oh, there's a Thanksgiving and your niece is one year old at this Thanksgiving and next you've got a Thanksgiving photo from the next year and the next year and the next year.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:33:03] Right.

Fonda Lee: [00:33:02] You can create, you can bring that mood back very quickly by just taking the reader back to that familiar meal place.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:33:10] That's fantastic, so you're saying use it as a structural element to create narrative circularity.

Fonda Lee: [00:33:17] Right.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:33:18] Okay. Ruthanna?

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:33:19] So if we expand what counts as part of a meal a little bit, the whole process of preparing can be a window on its own into relationship or into character and class contrasts. So, ranging from who actually is in the kitchen preparing to what's the relationship that lets people cook together or makes it harder for them to do that. A lot of times you go, see I'm thinking right now of Katherine Addison's *The Goblin Emperor* where the Emperor shocks everyone by wanting to get to know the people who do the cooking and are behind the scenes in all this beautiful stuff that's meant to be the set pieces in front of him.

[00:34:19] And you have other books where people gradually discover what's going on there and whether it's a good thing. And you have ones where someone may hide out in the kitchen because their very high class family is not comfortable to be around but there's some sort of safety there in this separate world where people actually are making the thing.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:34:45] Excellent. DongWon?

DongWon Song: [00:34:48] You know, one thing I think about when it comes to writing novels and portraying an individual scene or moment in a novel is density of information. Novels are really big, complex pieces of work. So if you're only doing one thing in a scene, if you're only giving us one character trait or setting up one world building thing, that's when things start to feel flat. That's when exposition feels really, well, exposition-y and info-dump-y.

[00:35:17] So a meal, for me, is such an amazing way to layer in three to four to five things in one scene without really seeming like you're putting forth that effort, right? Because you're getting material world building, you're getting the rules of the world, you're getting character, you're getting character interaction and dynamics, and you're moving the plot forward.

[00:35:36] One example I think about a lot when it comes to just incredible meal scenes, and I'm going to a TV example that's not genre. So apologies for that. But I'm thinking of the season two first episode of *Fleabag*, which I think is one of the most amazing pieces of television writing I've ever seen because the entire episode is just one meal. And it's this group of people who you kind of know from season one and they all come in with one attitude and you learn, okay, what's happened to them since we saw them last time? And then over the course of the meal, everything just sort of breaks down and shifts, and everyone comes out of that scene with a completely different set of priorities and relationships and dynamics.

[00:36:14] So we're given so much information and it builds over the course of the episode in a way that gives us this incredible shift in plot and this shift in character and this shift in understanding of who all these different people are. And it all happens over the course of this one meal. And I think those are such opportunities to take all these different people, mash them into one scene, force them to interact in complex ways and then give us an incredible amount of information.

[00:36:39] I think one of the most dense ways you can get information into us is a meal scene. And so think about that. Think about when you're trying to get a lot of information across to a readership. Maybe the thing to do is actually have your characters sit down and have a bite and talk to each other.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:36:55] Casey?

Casey Blair: [00:36:57] I agree with all of that, and particularly, I think in speculative fiction, the ability to convey information efficiently and economically is important because we have these huge worlds that they're often such a burden of learning that the reader has to take on from the beginning. And so, you know, court intrigue scenes when they have those kind of vast feasts are some of my favorite.

[00:37:24] But that said, I'm also going to argue with myself here because I think one of the most powerful moments of meal sharing that a lot of fiction actually will use is you have a character who doesn't have much food or they're hiding for some reason and somebody else is hungry, or there, and they choose to share their food. And I think just that very simple act, it doesn't take long, but it always tells us something about the character and many people talk about how to make characters likeable. You don't have to have them save a dog, right? But just, if you share your food with somebody who is hungry, that immediately tells you something about this person. Particularly if they have some reason that they shouldn't be sharing the food. Like, they will be starving next. And that choice, I think, can communicate a very great deal without having to have any of the normal trappings of the meal. It's just the act of sharing the food.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:38:22] Yeah. I think that you're absolutely correct, and I've seen that used extremely effectively a number of times. DW?

DongWon Song: [00:38:31] Yeah, just picking up what Casey said, food can be such a shortcut to an emotional relationship with a character. The thing I'm thinking of is, think of how deep our feelings are for Samwise Gamgee and his little box of spices. The fact that he brought these spices all the

way across Middle Earth just completely twists the knife in terms of how much we feel for this character and how much we love him and his relationship to this whole quest. So those tiny little moments where someone's relationship to food can be so illustrative and just such a short cut for us to empathize and understand a huge amount of information about a character in a very brief moment.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:39:11] Sure. It can also be humorous. I'm thinking of the, now that you made me think of *The Lord of the Rings*, I'm thinking of the movie version where everything about Merry and Pippin's relationship to food is yeah, served to lighten the mood of everything that's going on around it just because they really enjoy their groceries.

DongWon Song: [00:39:35] Or Holden's relationship to the coffee machine in *The Expanse*, right? Those little moments, I think, tell you a lot.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:39:43] Or Arthur Dent attempting to get tea. That's the entire plot driver. Just the desire for a cup of tea. Excellent. So I want to go back, unless somebody has something they want to pick up immediately we have about 10 minutes left. I want to go back and talk about food and enchantment, and food as enchantment, and meals and ceremonies if anybody has anything to say about those topics.

DongWon Song: [00:40:25] Well, I think food as enchantment and food as temptation is really, really elemental. It goes back to original sin stuff. Adam and Eve in the garden. It goes back to Persephone and the persimmon seeds. And you know, that works so well in modern fiction, too. You look at *Pan's Labyrinth*, that scene of the little girl being presented with this feast and knowing that if she touches it, it's going to cause horrible things and horrible things do happen. But it's so empathetic. You understand why she eats that food even though awful stuff happens as a result.

[00:41:00] I think enchantment—

Elizabeth Bear: [00:41:02] We all know we shouldn't have that second slice of cake.

DongWon Song: [00:41:04] Exactly, and yet we do. And yet we do. Or, the apple in *Snow White*? Is it *Snow White*? Yeah, *Snow White*.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:41:12] *Snow White*, yeah.

DongWon Song: [00:41:14] With the poisoned apple, right? It's just such this thing where food is such a vehicle for curses, for enchantment, for magical power in this way because I think it is this sort of magical relationship with things that give us sustenance.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:41:29] Okay, Ruthanna, then Fonda, then Casey.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:41:32] It's making me think about the universally, to readers, as far as I can tell, disappointing Turkish delight that is this sort of typical enchantment—

Elizabeth Bear: [00:41:44] I like Turkish delight.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:41:46] But do you like it that much? Would that be the thing that someone would offer to undermine your loyalty to family and—

Elizabeth Bear: [00:42:01] If I had been under wartime rationing for four years and hadn't tasted sugar, yeah, probably.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:42:08] Yeah, there's this context that is not there on the page but that makes that food particularly special. Whereas a lot of readers later are thinking, well, it must have that power because it tastes so good because it is the best possible food in any setting. And I think in a lot of cases we default to that in fairy markets and other sorts of enchanting food. Is this idea that it's because it's so objectively the thing that once you eat it, you will not be satisfied with any other food ever. And the fact that in Narnia, it is, in fact, that tailored to context. What it is that is so hard to get that it must be magical. And I think that's something that we don't see nearly enough of.

Fonda Lee: [00:43:06] Yeah—

Elizabeth Bear: [00:43:06] Fonda?

Fonda Lee: [00:43:06] You absolutely stole the Turkish delight example that I was going to use from Narnia around... a whole generation of children being sold this belief that Turkish delight was the ultimate food that you would give up your world and your family and then being perhaps a little bit disappointed. But then again, I ate the Turkish delight from... it was probably from like Costco or something. I don't know. It wasn't like the ultimate Turkish delight that you could have.

[00:43:42] But I'm thinking also about places where the food or this distortion, twisted food is a way to create a wacky angle in speculative fiction. And the example that came to me was Matt Wallace's *Sin du Jour* series, which is all about this catering company but they're serving demons and underworld creatures and they have the wackiest food requirements, and so these characters are bending over backwards to find these crazy ingredients. Or situations like that where just the food, the fantastical nature of the food itself or how vampires have food and

their particular traditions around that create certain twisted or surreal, or fun, interesting ways to infuse the magical element into a story.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:44:48] Yeah, and you get that a lot in children's literature, too, where the food is just a little bit sideways. You know, butter beer or all of the food in Charlie and the Chocolate Factor. Casey?

Casey Blair: [00:45:02] I think a lot of it also has to do with presentation. Because humans don't just cook delicious food, we also, not every single one of us, but in general we also tend to take care with how it is presented. We arrange these very special plates. We have filters on Instagram to make our food look even better. And I don't think that's an accident. I think we talked... DongWon mentioned Sam and the spices. It's not just about him being able to flavor food. It's about the care that he is taking with the food and with the ritual of eating.

[00:45:49] That ritual of taking care is also how they get, I think gets it into the kind of idea of ceremony. It's how you can use it in multiple ways because twisting that ceremony, if you take this kind of, this ritual of eating and sharing food and make it unsafe. Or make it... somehow if you twist what people expect to be coming out of the act of sharing food and make into something else, that is a very kind of deep fundamental level betrayal of something that's very basic in human cultures.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:46:35] DongWon?

DongWon Song: [00:46:36] Yeah, and really following up on what Casey's saying there. I think food is a multi-sensory experience. It's about the smell, it's about the look. It's auditory, it's visual. But it's also conceptual. It's also what was the thought behind this dish? What's its relation to other things in the culture. When I've been to really fine dining restaurants, the things I've enjoyed the most were dishes that were almost like a joke. It was almost, someone was riffing on a concept and it made me laugh in a delighted way, and things like that. And there was a medieval obsession with taking foods and presenting them as if they were other foods. So taking one thing—

Elizabeth Bear: [00:47:15] mm-hmm. Subtleties.

DongWon Song: [00:47:16] Subtleties, thank you. I knew there was a term for it. You can have that in your fantasy world in a way that really plays with people's conceptions of what is real and what is expected. And really think not just about serving that bowl of stew, which we see so much in fantasy, but what else can people do with it? What does that stew look like? What does it sound like? There's so many different ways to present a stew

around the world that can, I think, really enrich a sense of presence and culture and relationship to the thing that they're eating.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:47:49] Yeah, absolutely. If nobody has any other points to make, I think we will throw it open to audience questions. If the audience is listening.

Scott: [00:48:06] Hello, it is I, the audience. Not just a little tech goblin helping you with the recording in the background. I am the audience. Actually, I do have a question. Not a question, more of a comment in 38 parts.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:48:28] I'm sorry, we're out of time.

Scott: [00:48:31] Okay, good I just wanted to give us that catharsis.

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:48:32] I have a moderator for that.

Scott: [00:48:34] No actually my question is, walking that sometimes fine line between false exoticization and evocation. As writers, we are attempting to, and as readers, we are generally hoping to receive an experience, a sensual experience or a cultural experience or an emotional experience that is new, or at least novel to us. And so we are looking for a certain amount of description and evocation. How do you walk the good side of that line without progressing into caricature, essentialization, et cetera?

Elizabeth Bear: [00:49:24] Anyone?

Ruthanna Emrys: [00:49:27] I think some of it can just be having people have more variation in how they react. A lot of exoticization is, you have them, who do this strange thing, and us who all have basically the same reaction to it. And you get that with the elves. Everyone likes elvish food and you get that with Klingons, everyone thinks it's gross except for Dax who is more awesome than everyone else. But some people like it and some people don't, and some people say, hey this reminds me of this other thing I had once, then that, to me, makes it less Othered and more a real thing that people can interact with in all the multitude of ways that people react to something that's new to them.

DongWon Song: [00:50:16] Yeah, and I think it's presented—oh, sorry.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:50:18] It's okay.

Casey Blair: [00:50:18] I was going to say, related to that. I think point of view does a lot. How you choose to describe it. You can tell whether it's the author trying to be like, look what cool things I came up with based on what the character actually thinks about the food and whether it makes sense for

a thing a character would be thinking about the food. The character can also exoticize it if that's a choice you want to make, but that should be a deliberate choice. But I think, really couching the perspective and description of the food and the meals in the point of view goes a long way.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:51:02] Okay, Fonda?

Fonda Lee: [00:51:03] Yeah, I was going to say something similar in so far as all food is good. I think that, when you think about, well what makes food palatable in fiction. It's not just describing it to the umpteenth level of detail of what this dish is made out of. And yes, you can take pains to describe your food very well but as long as you keep in mind that the act of sharing a meal and the characters enjoying this food together is the point of the narrative, then the food itself becomes the backdrop on which you're creating these character interactions.

[00:51:54] So if you have that last meal of brown stew before your characters go into battle against their enemy hordes, that's going to be the best meal to those characters. You could be in a foreign land and have all sorts of unfamiliar food to the reader but the way that you're presenting it is going to make unfamiliar food seem presentable. So as an author, I feel like my job is oftentimes just to get out of the way of the story and not... to be very careful about infusing authorial voice into judgments around anything, but especially food, and to just sort of let the character's perceptions take over and put it on the page and let those characters react to it.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:52:44] Yeah. DongWon?

DongWon Song: [00:52:47] Yeah, I mean, I completely agree with Fonda about the idea of getting out of the way of the, sorry, can you hear me?

Elizabeth Bear: [00:52:56] Yep, go ahead.

DongWon Song: [00:52:57] Sorry. Yeah, I agree with Fonda about the idea of the author getting out of the way of the character's perception of the food. But I think also one of the things that can really save you is specificity. Doing your homework as the person writing the book in terms of what cultural touchstones are you cuing off of, right? What kinds of foods do they eat and being really specific about what those dishes are. Cultures aren't a monolith so there's tons of variation in there. And then also think about where those foods come from. What are they growing in that region, what kind of climate is it? Are they growing potatoes in your east Asian culture? Does that make sense? Really look at what the material things

you introduce into your world and make sure that the food you're doing works in concert with the other elements that you've put there. And then, once you have that sort of framework and setup, you can sort of very quickly hit different cultural touchstones and it'll feel really fluid and integrated into the book, and not jump out as this exotic or appropriative thing.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:53:59] Okay, Fonda?

Fonda Lee: [00:53:59] Yeah, I have one other thing to add because DongWon made me think of being intentional about your choices as an author. And food in our world is very closely tied not just to specific cultures, but to influences of colonialism and mixing of different cultural traditions and cuisines, so it's a very effective shorthand from the perspective of writing fiction. Because the degree to which you use descriptions or terms of food that are very specific are going to ground you, or not ground you, to our world.

[00:54:40] So as an example, I don't want to ground my secondary world to any specific country in our world so I'm very careful to not use words like sushi or dim sum but to describe the food in a way that evokes an east Asian culture without grounding it to one specific one. Another fantasy author, Paul Krueger, wrote a book recently, Steel Crow Saga where he has a character pretty early on in the book enjoy a meal of adobo. And with no other information, I know that he's pulling on the Philippines as a cultural touch stone with just that one character eating that food.

[00:55:25] So you have to be, I think, intentional as an author about what words are you going to use and how specific or general are you going to be when describing these meals.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:55:36] Excellent. Does anybody else have any other brief comments to sum up before we give it back to Casey to do the outro?

[00:55:49] Final thoughts? All right, Casey take us home.

Casey Blair: [00:55:55] All right, thank you everyone for joining us for The Fantasy Feast panel.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:56:11] It's all good. Dead air. Dead air!

Scott: [00:56:17] And she mysteriously vanished.

Casey Blair: [00:56:19] I'm back. Thanks everyone for joining us for the podcast. This was 4th Street Fantasy 2020 Special Edition. And thank you to all the panelists for joining us, and that's a wrap.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:56:33] Thanks everybody.

DongWon Song: [00:56:34] Thanks you guys!

Fonda Lee: [00:56:37] Thanks Casey, thanks for moderating, Bear.

Elizabeth Bear: [00:56:41] Thank you.

Scott: [00:56:41] Cheers, everybody.