

Women at Warp Episode 177: Far Beyond the Stars

[Women at Warp theme]

Sarah: Hi and welcome to Women at Warp: A Roddenberry *Star Trek* Podcast. Join us on our continuing mission to explore intersectional diversity in infinite combinations. My name is Sarah and thanks for tuning in. With me today are Kennedy.

Kennedy: Hello.

Sarah: And Sue.

Sue: Hi there.

Sarah: And we are thrilled to be joined by a special guest, the author of the novelization of the topic of our show today, *Far Beyond the Stars*, Mr. Steven Barnes.

Steven: Howdy.

Sarah: So, before we get into our deep dive on the episode, we have a little bit of housekeeping to do first. Our show is made possible by our patrons on Patreon. If you'd like to become a patron, you can do so for as little as a dollar per month and get awesome rewards from thanks on social media to silly watch-along commentaries to customized loot boxes. Visit www.patreon.com/womenatwarp for more info.

You can also visit our TeePublic store with Women at Warp merch along with other non-podcast specific *Trek* designs. And that's at teepublic.com/stores/womenatwarp.

And if you'll be at Emerald City Comic Con December 2nd to the 5th, you can catch Grace and myself doing two Women at Warp panels. Thursday at 5, we'll be talking about women's costuming in *Star Trek*. And Friday at 5, we'll be talking about all the current and upcoming seasons of *Trek*. And we have a lot to talk about, so we hope to see you there.

So, Steve, could we just jump in and could you tell our listeners a little bit about yourself and your history with *Star Trek* and how you ended up doing this novelization?

Steven: Well, I've been a science fiction novelist since the early 80s, actually. And of course, *Star Trek* came out when I was in high school. I guess it was *The Original Series* and I enjoyed it very much. It was arguably the best science fiction show with a continuing cast that had ever been on television. So, we all loved it. And what happened was after I guess I'd written maybe 10 novels at the time that I was contacted by the publisher that they had a script called *Far Beyond the Stars* that dealt with Sisko and dealt with issues of race in the 1950s. And I think that when they decided to novelize it, they realized that they were going to need interiority. In other words, if you have a black character on *Star Trek* played by a black actor or actress, hopefully not somebody in blackface, and that person can bring the interiority to it. They can bring their experiences to it, what their life is like.

But if you're doing a book and the book is written by a white guy, then his ability to express the interiority of a character, the reality of a character will be limited by their experience and contact with people of whatever group they're trying to represent. So, the easiest thing to do, the fastest solution is to find a writer who is a member of the same group that is being discussed, that is being represented. That way, they can bring their experience to it.

So, when they asked me if I would do it-- and I had a month to write it, I would have to do it in a month. And I read the script and I liked the script and I thought this was a fine piece of

work. But I figured that no matter how I vamped, no matter how I fleshed out or stretched out or took my time with the text, a 60-page script is not going to make a 200 and something page book. So, I was going to need to create a backstory, I was going to need to do something to flesh it out and once again within this time period.

So, I had a couple of weeks before I got the script. So, I used that time to set up the backstory. I had read the script. I came up with an idea about what the backstory could conceivably be. And I used the time before I got the completed script back and the clock started running to research the backstory that I had in mind so that by the time the clock started ticking, I had everything laid out. And so, I had two weeks to write the first draft, and then I spent a week polishing it, in other words.

And the first draft was basically, I would take the script and I would probably spent a week taking the script and turning that into a very, very rough draft. And then the next week, I roughed out the backstory. That was brutal. I was just doing thousands and thousands of words every day. But I didn't worry about spelling or grammar or syntax or anything. It's just, get it out. Then, the next week I polished it. I corrected the spelling and did the indentations and corrected the grammar so that I had some kind of draft at the end of the third week. And then, the last week was going over it and polishing it.

So, that was the pattern that I went through. Two weeks to create a first draft, one week to polish, and then the last week, the fourth week to refine that polish. I was just working from the time I woke up in the morning until I went to bed at night. Maybe I took some time-- I certainly took some time to eat. I probably took some time to exercise, but that was it. I mean, it's just when I was finished working for the day, I just collapsed into bed.

And I think that I was able to do that because it felt like a good project. It felt as if the people who created this were trying to do something real. They were trying to deal with some real issues. And so, I felt that it behooved me to take this seriously as I could and to bring as close to my A game as I could, given the compressed time frame that was involved.

Sarah: Well, I really enjoyed it. I never would have guessed, with all of the extra material you added, that this was a four-week project.

Steven: [laughs] That's all they gave me. [Sarah laughs]

Sarah: We'll talk a little more about that. So, today we are going to be discussing the episode *Far Beyond the Stars*. Season 6, Episode 13, original air date February 11th, 1998. This is a lot of people's favorite episode, including Avery Brooks. Steve, you mentioned earlier that you felt like they purposely picked a black author to write the novelization. They also, I understand, specifically asked Avery Brooks to direct this episode, even though they didn't like the combination of someone being the main character and the director at the same time, because it sounds like they were being really sensitive about this episode and making sure the topic was explored and presented by people in that group.

This show was nominated for three Emmys, Outstanding Art Direction for a Series, Outstanding Costume Design for a Series for Robert Blackman, and Outstanding Hairstyling for a Series. The cast and crew were very disappointed that Avery Brooks wasn't nominated.

And the main thing I love about this episode is that it deals with racism without metaphor. In *TOS*, they're like, "We'll talk about racism, but it's going to be about aliens who are half black and half white."

Steven: Yeah, I hated that. If you'd wanted to do that, you wanted me to believe that you were doing something, then one of those aliens would have been played by a black actor,

one of them would have been played by a white actor. And then, they would have had black and white makeup on. Casting them both as white actors was not an act of courage.

Sarah: Yes, and actually it was a very different story to start with. The original story had Jake traveling back in time to the 1950s and meeting a circle of sci-fi writers. And then in the end, the whole thing turned out to have been a trick played on him by an alien studying humans. So, they ended up totally rewriting it and making it about Benjamin Sisko experiencing racism.

Steven: Cool.

Kennedy: There is always fun parts of this entire episode to take away with when you watch it several times, especially after as long as it's been on the air. And every time I watch it, I get deeper [laughs] and deeper into it and start formulating all types of theories as to how it relates to the actual universe, instead of it just being a vehicle for how to talk about the horrors of racism. And the fun part about that is that it kind of does both at the same time. I find it interesting that they were initially going to go with Jake and having an alien play tricks on him. Like, that's cool, right? That's *Trek*. But that's also very safe. That is a safe way to go about it because as we even reference in the episode itself, it kind of negates the meat of, or at least the poignancy of the story itself.

Steven: I don't think that would have been a better episode. No.

Kennedy: Yeah. So, I find it interesting when you try to think about it within the context of the universe itself. And I can't help but think of the Prophets guiding Benny to conceptualize a future, and it just happened to involving somebody who looks like him and retroactively explaining how Sisko is the Emissary, not just out of pure luck because he was the first one in the wormhole, but because this science fiction author in the 50s in Harlem manifested him, and the Prophets caught wind of that cosmically. I don't know however you explain somebody noncorporeal like the Prophets.

But they caught wind of Benny's imagination and the pain and the frustration in which that type of concept would come from. And the second someone matched the description in the distant future, they were like, "Hey, blam. You're the Emissary because some great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great relative of yours said so."

Sue: See, I always pictured it the other way around because we get the framing story in this episode of Sisko wondering whether he can go on. He's losing so many friends. He's hurting so much. And then, the Prophets make him experience part of Benny's life, which ends with, "You're the dreamer and the dream." And it seems like the moral of this is you have to keep going even when you don't want to. And I've found myself wondering if that is a good moral.

Kennedy: Yeah, there's heavy themes there. When you take into consideration the complexities and the nuances of racism, especially as heavily socialized as it was in the 50s, and then try to squeeze it into science fiction, there's just not enough-- [sighs] Mm, I feel like there's not enough time in a podcast, certainly, but also in an episode to really get into it and sink your teeth into the meat of the issue, if you will, to use a tired analogy like that. But it was only through, shameless plug, *Me Doing Things with your Away Team* that I thought about it in a different way. And I haven't quite formalized a theory yet. That can be a panel in the next, I don't know, whatever, the near future, I'll figure it out eventually.

But I feel like it was fed to us as if Ben Sisko went back in time because of a common thread of frustration, a common thread of giving-up-it-ness. It's late here. My brain is failing. [laughs] But you know what I mean? Like, desperation in terms of feeling like their struggle is fruitless. And what's the point of going on if I'm still enduring what we're trying to overcome in

the first place? And either way you look at it, I guess, is my point, there's a common thread of the Prophets picking up on the despair that both men felt in their respective times.

Sarah: Mm-hmm. Well, Kennedy, I don't want to blow your mind, but they considered making the ending of the entire series having the final shot be Benny walking through the station.

Kennedy: See? There were hints to it at the end though, right? Because I distinctly remember like him being in an institution, like writing on the walls and it was Damar.

Sue: I read that they considered having the final shot being like Benny directing *Deep Space Nine*.

Sarah: Ooh, I hadn't heard that.

Sue: Yeah. But I want to jump back real quick to something you brought up, Sarah, which is that the episode kept being praised in reviews for dealing with racism on Earth and not being so metaphorical and steeped in science fiction as *Star Trek* usually did. And I just want to point out there was a review specifically from the Chicago Tribune that pointed out that this episode would "shatter whatever remains of the opposition to Avery Brooks's casting."

And I think we sometimes forget, because we're like 20 plus years removed from the original airing of this episode, that was a thing in fandom that people were still angry in 1998 that a black man was commanding a space station. People who called themselves fans of *Star Trek* were still mad about it.

Kennedy: So, at least the hatorade is consistent despite your generational existence. [Sue laughs] And at least the people who for some reason find reasons to hate modern *Trek*, I'll call it. At least, they're the same folks who have issues with progress in general. So, consistency. One of the strong, biggest things, the biggest poignancy in this episode is discussing racism without pulling any punches and seeing how the supporting cast in the writer's room not only supported Benny as an individual, but also him creatively. There's definitely meaning behind [unintelligible 00:13:48], kind of dull, mediocre, robot author guy getting a novel right. Not really having to work hard, not having to excel, not having to struggle, not dealing with strife, just coasting along and getting rewarded for it. Meanwhile, Benny is literally fighting tooth and nail to get this story made.

But the biggest thing I always had issue with, despite the reasons why we can argue it away, is Siddig El-Fadil's character is clearly still not a white person, but they have him coded as British as if he couldn't possibly understand, that this brown person sitting in this room couldn't possibly understand what Benny's going through in context of his own experience in America at that time, but also wherever he came from previously. I felt like that was a bit of a-- the fact that it wasn't explained raises a lot of questions for me personally.

I understand that to keep the story pushing, they had to center on Benny to make it a little bit more oomph like. But I was kind of like, this is a whole other opportunity to weigh in on this in the way that Armin Shimerman's character was always coming to bat for Benny, always calling the editor out on his BS for whatever reason, I felt like there could have been another opportunity for an ally there. So, maybe his silence was heavier than I gave it weight for initially. I don't know. I'm curious to hear if any of you have thought about that, if I'm reading too much into it, because that's possible too. [laughs]

Sue: I've thought about this a lot, and I think not just in this episode, but throughout the series, I think the writers sort of whitewashed Sid.

Kennedy: For sure.

Sue: Because they never really lean into that character being a person of color ever.

Kennedy: They always just leave it as him being British. But then, they'll go so far as to cast brown people as his parents. And it's like, well, that's great that you're normalizing it, right? That's the ultimate goal, right? Of stories like this, of movements across generations, like, that's the goal. But at the same time, also not talking about it is kind of like erasure. It's the whole "I don't see" color argument.

Sarah: I do have a quote from Avery Brooks that kind of addresses, that sort of at least mentions it. He said, "If we had changed the people's clothes, the story could be about right now. What's insidious about racism is that it is unconscious even among these bright and enlightened characters. A group that includes a woman writer who has to use a man's name to get her work published and who is married to a brown man with the British accent in 1953. It's perfectly reasonable to coexist with someone like Pabst," who was the editor. It's in the culture. It's the way people think. So, that was the approach we took. I never talked about racism. I just showed how these intelligent people think and it all came out of them."

Kennedy: Interesting.

Sarah: Oh, and incidentally, about Armin Shimerman character, he was actually supposed to be the editor originally. That character was based on H.L. Gold, who was the editor of *Galaxy* magazine that *Incredible Tales* was based on. But Ira Steven Behr was worried that casting him as this like, penny-pinching editor might come across as a little antisemitic. So, they moved him to be Herb Rossoff and made Rene the editor.

Sue: They also made René much more of a John W. Campbell type. John W. Campbell, the very problematic and racist and xenophobic and misogynistic editor of *Astounding*.

Kennedy: Oh, see, I had no idea. This is definitely Sarah's wheelhouse when it comes to zine publishing and collecting stories and stuff. So, I'm like-- I came here to learn. [laughs] I will look up this dude though. What was his name, Sue?

Sue: John W. Campbell.

Kennedy: Boo.

Sue: It's one of those parts of history and of science fiction history and of literature history where this guy was in charge of this huge magazine and held all these really disgusting beliefs. But if your story was good enough, he'd publish it. And that's like Asimov is Jewish and this guy not a fan of the Jewish people. But he published Asimov stories because he thought they were good enough. If you are interested in that sort of history, there is somewhat recent book, I think it's just called *Astounding*, that goes through a lot of this stuff from this time period and from that magazine.

Kennedy: That's good to know.

Sue: Digression. Apologies.

Kennedy: No, no. It's what we do here at Women at Warp. We provide alternate points of view and resources.

Sarah: Yes. And just to give a little more background. There was a major award named after John W. Campbell, and they did not change the name of this award until 2019, mostly

because the person who won it that year, Jeannette Ng, walked up on stage to accept and said, "John W. Campbell was a fucking fascist."

Kennedy: Thank God.

Sarah: [laughs] It was a wonderful moment.

Kennedy: I love when people put things out there like that. You have to call it out as it is. Racism has existed on a social level because we've permitted it to for this long. Institutionalized racism is a little different. It takes a lot longer-- It's more hands on deck in order to dismember something like that. But in terms of what we find socially acceptable, you have to call it out which is one of the reasons why I appreciated Armin Shimerman's character in this, because he just called him a fascist.

Sue: He was ready to fight.

Kennedy: All the time.

Kennedy: I was like, "Let's go." I was like, "Yo, boy. Let's get it." Just seeing somebody who was ready and willing and had the capacity to stand up and support somebody else during that context and other extremely racially charged settings, conversations, tense areas, it gives me just a sigh of relief because we just don't see that. If there wasn't more of that, we wouldn't be in the situations that we're in. So, to see a character be that vocal, I feel, like, cut some of the tension of that episode for me. The love between Benny and Cassie, of course, helped smooth that over too. It was heavy stuff and made heavier still with--

Oh, gosh, I don't want to say pulp, because conceptually that means it's trash and they've gotten rid of it. But the delicious goodness of all of their portrayals.

Everybody's performance was so-- Like, nobody was struggling. Not a single person struggled with this abrupt change of character for them. And it really speaks to the weight of each of these actors, the direction of Avery Brooks. Almost a little too much in some cases. I'm looking directly at Mark Alaimo and Jeffrey Combs as the cops. I was like, "See, now I'm concerned because this feels natural."

[laughter]

Sue: I got to tell you though, the part that got me I mean, is when Rene, as Pabst says, "It's not about what's right. It's about what is." Oh, God.

Kennedy: Yeah. Seeing some of your favorite actors slip into racist roles like that is jarring because, yes, they're actors. They are paid to make you believe what they want you to believe. But at the same time, sometimes, I will always look at Jeffrey Combs sideways because of this performance. Like, always, always, I'll be like, "Oh, hey, what's up? No, thank you. I'll keep you right in front of me, sir. Appreciate you for everything that you've done in the fandom. Thanks."

Sarah: Well, I feel like they do a great job of setting up this ensemble cast in completely different roles in a very short period of time. Steve, when you got the script, did you have any thoughts on all of these new characters we were getting introduced to?

Steven: No, I just took it as writ. The characters in the 50s were simply a group of characters. There was no indication who was going to be playing what. So, I simply did them straight. I didn't put in cues so that you'd know that this was really this person or that person. I don't think I did. It was just a question of dealing with the story, dealing with themes. Who

are these people? What do they want? What's going on in this situation? And then, needless to say, I have my own attitudes about racism, whether it's in the real world or in the world of fiction or specifically in the world of science fiction or even more specifically in the world of *Star Trek*. Some of those attitudes I kept to myself.

Others of them I found ways to insert into the works, trying to create a philosophical structure in which I could use my own definitions of what these things are with an intent to make a contribution to the cultural conversation.

Sarah: Awesome. And then, in this first act, we see some of the different kinds of racism that Benny is dealing with in the 50s at work. It's a very polite racism where he and Kay are asked to sleep late on the day that someone's going to come take a photo of the office. Pabst says the average reader is not going to spend his hard-earned cash on stories written by negroes. And I felt it must have been inspired by John W. Campbell refusing to serialize *Nova* by Samuel R. Delany.

Steven: Well, he did publish Samuel R. Delany, I believe. He recognized that Delany was a genius. But what he wouldn't do is allow a depiction of, let's say, an advanced African civilization. Being a racist doesn't mean that you think all black people are monkeys. You just think that on average, we're closer to monkeys than white people. So, it's a much subtler situation. And it's not John W. Campbell wasn't this huge logjam. His publisher wasn't the huge logjam. Other writers weren't the huge logjam. The audience wasn't the huge logjam. If it had been isolated to any individual or any position, we wouldn't have had as much trouble dealing with this. The problem isn't that we allowed racism to continue. The problem is that human beings are tribalistic and one vicious aspect of tribalism is racism. It's not about them or it. It's about us.

And I think that's the thing that's hard for people to look at, which is why, it's like, "Oh, God, not on *Star Trek*," or, "Oh, God, not in science fiction." What, you think *Star Trek* isn't done by human beings? Science fiction isn't done by human beings? There's nothing special about it. If there was something special about it, we could have done something about it much more easily. But it's locked into the natural human tendency to believe that your dog is the smartest, your mommy's the prettiest, and your daddy is the strongest. That's wired into what we are. And the ugly version of that is when we actually believe that--

It's one thing to cheer for your school. Tribalism to me is cheering for the home team. Racism is actually believing the other team [unintelligible 00:25:06]. And vicious bigotry, would be being willing to kneecap the captain of the opposing team. So, almost everybody has tribalistic aspects. Fans like to believe that they're better than mundanes. Fans are slans and so forth was a button that was very popular at science fiction conventions back in the 70s. So, because there is this arena that we're very happy with, that we love, that represents us, doesn't mean that arena is morally superior to westerns or detective stories or anything else. It just happens to be what it is that we like.

And it can seem amazing. So, how can there be all these evolved stories about aliens and robots and so forth, but we're still got racism? It's because aliens and robots don't compete for resources and reproductive partners. They're not a threat. They're extensions of our own egos. But other human beings compete with us. They're real. So, the fear is not going to come out against an alien or robot in a story but the same science fiction field.

I could walk in a science fiction bookstore back in the 80s, 70s, and there are thousands of books, and there will be nothing on the covers of any of those books-- my standard comments was the covers of the books were all white people and their imaginary friends. There was nobody of other ethnicities on the covers of those books. There was nothing

particularly progressive about science fiction. In fact, it was more regressive than, say, mysteries.

But I think that started changing in the late 90s, and we've made a lot of progress since then. But for almost 20 years, Octavia Butler and I were the only black people writing science fiction in the world, as far as we could see. And editors would say, "Well, it's because black people aren't interested in science fiction." Or other people would say, "Well, we can't put black people on the covers because the audience won't like it." Once again, the audience blamed the authors, the authors blamed the publishers, the publishers blamed the art departments. The art departments blamed marketing, and marketing blamed distribution, and distribution blamed the customers. So, it was running around in a circle, nobody taking responsibility for the fact that human beings are wired up like that. There's nothing harder to change than the person you see in the mirror.

Sarah: I'm just going to point out that in 2007, Nnedi Okorafor had to fight the publisher not to have a white woman on the cover of her book, *The Shadow Speaker*, which is about a black Muslim woman.

Steven: Yeah, I didn't know that. Nnedi was my student at Clarion a long time ago. She was exceptional from the beginning. I'm not surprised. And as long as you look at it, this is how human beings are. And in America, we've dealt with it in a particular way. We've had to deal with it in a particular way that involved white people and black people, and white people have most of the power. But if you take the sting out of it, if you take the moral dimension out of it and say that it's a perceptual thing that then gets multiplied across millions of separate small choices that ends up creating massive social effects, then it becomes easier than saying, "Well, are you saying that white people, for instance, are evil?" No, not saying that at all. It has nothing to do with it. It has to do with this is the way human beings are. And this is one way that we have dealt with the fallout for that, one way that the fallout from this manifests in our culture and is manifested historically.

So, asking the question about, well, what is it-- To ask how do you deal with it, you first have to define what the thing is. And I would say the definition of racism is to attribute differential worth or capacity on the basis of race or ethnicity, especially innate, as opposed to social conditioning. Once you have that definition, you can then say, "Well, how does it manifest?" And then, you can ask questions like, "And what do we do about it? And what role might fiction or science fiction or *Star Trek* have in helping to alleviate this thing if we decide that alleviating it is what we want."

There's a lot of conversation to be had there. I personally think that the most important thing is to define the situation clearly and to discuss it. I think that discussing it is a massive, a massive curative. If that were not true, it wouldn't have taken until *Django Unchained* before we had a major Hollywood film dealing with slavery as the thing itself. Prior to that time, you had movies like *Beloved*, which had ex-slaves, or *Glory*, which had ex-slaves, or *Amistad*, which had people on their way to being slaves. But seeing slaves as slaves and depicting their world from their position as opposed to letting them be objects, letting them be subjects.

Up until *Django Unchained*, 10 years ago, or however long that was, the most popular image of slavery was *Gone with the Wind*. I mean, that was in many ways the most popular film that will ever be made in many ways, in adjusted dollars and audience and how much impact it had on the culture. And that was a highly curated, extraordinarily carefully designed image of the institution. And the entire movie was basically an apologia for that institution. If you take a look at the opening crawl, it says, "Once upon a time there was a land of cavaliers and their ladies, of this and that, of masters and slaves. A wonderful world that is gone with the wind." That's what the title means. So, this is the subtext of race relations in America.

And if you don't talk about it directly, if you say, "Well, it was Joseph Campbell," yeah, Campbell was a racist, absolutely. But he wasn't alone. If he'd been alone-- an editor or a producer or a writer becomes popular because the images that they create appeal to the audience. They know their taste in something is shared by enough of an audience to make their movie or television series or magazine successful. It's not rocket science in that sense. So, you can't look at him and say, "Oh, my God, that's terrible." You then have to ask the next question. Why did his sense of taste, why did his ethic, why did his view of the universe appeal so much to his readers? You can't absolve them. You just can't.

What you can do is kind of say, "Well, we are human beings that we have this particular tendency." And that, I think, is a philosophical question that science fiction took a long time to begin to answer in any direct form.

Sarah: Yeah, I thought it was interesting that first Pabst wants Sisko to make the captain in his stories white, and then it suggested that they make this the dream of a black man to make it more palatable to the audience. And Benny agrees that. He says, "It's better than chalk on a sidewalk." Yeah, he doesn't necessarily agree, but if this is the only way he can get his stories published, he's going to go for it.

Steven: And the idea of how he's going to feel about that. There's a line Larry Fishburne in the movie, *Tuskegee Airmen*, talks about the question about, how do I feel about my country and how does my country feel about me? The power, the energy that drives art is the sense of, who am I? This is who I am. This is how I see the world. This is my heart. And then you focus that through your craft. But if an artist feels in their heart, the audience doesn't see me, the audience doesn't want to see me. The audience doesn't really want to know what I think and feel. The audience wants me to be a trained monkey, jumping up and down and telling stories and smiling and acting like everything is fine when it's not.

And I have this pain, and you're interested in my laughter and you're interested in my extrapolations and my fantasies, but you don't want to know who I really am. That, I think, informed my view of Benny. The knowledge that he loved people who did not love him. He loved an audience and wanted that audience to love him, and they did not. And that is a painful thing for an artist. It drives people into alcoholism and suicide.

Sarah: And there is, in Act 3, a bit of the other black characters in the episode trying to convince him to give up-- not to give up but to move on. We have Cassie wanting him to give up his writing so they can take over the restaurant and start their life together. And we have Jimmy, this ends up being the only time the N word has ever been used in *Star Trek*. And I kind of admire that if they're going to have an episode about racism, they didn't shy away from it.

Steven: I think that was the right choice. *Star Trek* has its own issues, which we may or may not get into. But what I will say is that I do believe that *Star Trek* was also one of the best shows that science fiction ever had for trying to deal with these things. If it couldn't do it 100% or if it had its own flaws, that's because it was created by human beings. It's an exceptional series of shows and it has tried to do something of value across many years. That's much to its credit.

Sarah: Yeah. It's hard for me to wrap my head around the idea of Benny and the other writers in the 1950s having to make science fiction conform to a very narrow range of ideas and perspectives versus what I've always felt science fiction is supposed to do, which is provoke new ideas and make you see new perspectives.

Steven: Well, it does provoke new ideas, but the only way that would not be true is if racism really wasn't much of a problem in America. And if racism wasn't a problem in America, then

how do you explain the differential statistics of things like infant mortality and lifespan and incarceration rates and inherited wealth? I mean, really, you only have two choices when you take a look at those statistics. Either you think that the people are different, or you think that the territory they've traversed is different, that there have been obstacles. And the more familiar you are with those statistics, either the larger the obstacles or greater the gap in capacity between the groups would have to be. People are welcome to come down on either side of that.

But if you know that this has happened, that we've had centuries of this, then it is reasonable that science fiction would not be free of this. I think that you might hope so because you found safe haven there, that you felt like, "Ah, finally I found a place feels like home." And you hate to think that those sorts of thoughts can exist at home. Isn't there some place that is free of these things? Certainly, people who could dream of the stars would see more clearly than that. But I think that's not paying attention to the way we really are as a species, what we really do, how much we really other people, the degree to which we put people in boxes.

I think that we're starting to look at issues of race and gender much more deeply now than we did 20 years ago, 25 years ago. And I think that it's important to forgive ourselves for being human. And that allows us to forgive science fiction and say there is this thing that we love. It is exceptional, but it ain't perfect.

Sue: There's a difference too, I think, between theory and practice here. Because you can present new ideas in these older stories, and lots of authors certainly did. But when all the characters are white or robots or presumed white because it's never fully stated, so therefore-- we've talked lots of times about how the default character is a white man, and every other is truly an alien species, then there's this distance that white audiences especially have in thinking about these new ideas. When you start bringing in marginalized people into the stories and making it, just like we talked about at the very beginning of this discussion, that *Star Trek* was dealing with racism on Earth, it makes it a lot more difficult for white people to grapple with.

Steven: Well, by setting it in the past, it allowed people to say, "Oh, wasn't it terrible back then?"

Sue: Sure, yeah.

Steven: It wasn't me, maybe it was my grandparents or it was my parents, but it's not me. The real power would have been doing something that was set in the same year as the episode was made. That would have been devastating.

Sue: The closer you get to home, the more difficult it is for people.

Steven: That's right. And that's the whole thing, that people want to believe it's over. You want to believe that we're not having to deal with that. And I can understand that, I truly do. I have a lot of sympathy for them. But it's not honest.

Kennedy: I would argue that it's painfully honest because, regardless of the method of which the story's being told, whether it's told through the lens of science fiction, whether it's told through the lens of a period drama-- historical fiction rather because it takes place in the past, rather it takes place in the future, the painful parts of that episode are painful for the exact same reasons. It's that level of anguish, that level of despair, the way society gaslit Benny into believing that his story was somehow inherently not worth it, is something that transcends time. It transcends genre.

Steven: Now, I would argue with that because I've simply heard too many people talk about, "Isn't it terrible how bad things were then," but not make the application to, "Is it still that bad now?" It allows them to say it happened in the past? And I've had countless conversations about it.

Kennedy: Well, my point was that the honesty of racism transcends genre. So, whether it's being told in a method like this, or whether it's being discussed over the watercooler or however you choose to talk about it, the reality of its effects are still very real. And there's no way to be dishonest about how it affects people.

Steven: No, but I hear people being dishonest about that all the time, seriously. Literally every day, because I spend a lot of time on social media and I don't think a day has gone by that I don't see people in denial about it. And I'm deadly serious about this.

Kennedy: Well, sir, just because someone is in denial of it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

Steven: No, no, what I'm saying is that what people want is to be able to say, "It was bad back then."

Kennedy: Right. But my point is that it's bad regardless. Regardless of when it's back then or if it's now. If one could make the argument that it's worse now because we have a point of reference in terms of how bad it "could" have been."

Steven: I would never say that. I would never say it was worse now.

Kennedy: Yeah, my point is trying to quantify it.

Steven: I think you can quantify it. I think you can take a look at things along the lines of, like I said, inherited wealth, incarceration rates, infant mortality, and you can look at things along the lines of percentage of representation in Congress. There are a number of different things that you really can look at to quantify these things. And it would seem to me to be pretty clear that generation by generation, we're getting better.

Kennedy: Well, then, I'll have to respectfully disagree then, because we can go back and forth in terms of that.

Sarah: Well, I just want to jump in and mention it was very different in 1998, watching the scene where Jimmy is shot because he had a weapon AKA a crowbar that he was using to break into a car, than it is to watch it today, having the context of the last couple of years where this has been so much more in the news. And incidentally, in the original script, it was actually Willie that was killed for dating a white woman.

Steven: Yeah. Just remembering that interracial marriages were illegal until sometime in the late 60s, was it? You can take a look at stuff like that., I tend to because our feelings can be anywhere, and I can feel anything I want to. I really like data. That's the way I look at things. If something is damaging, it's going to have measurable effects. And so, when those measurable effects are gone, I don't care how people feel, it's not damaging anymore. So, that's the way I tend to look at these things. And of course, other people look at them different ways.

Sarah: So, in Act 5, we get to the big climax where Benny returns to the office after having been beaten by the cops so he can catch the new issue with the story in it. And Pabst arrives and tells them that the publisher pulped the issue and that Benny is fired on top of that. This is where Avery Brooks gives the most powerful performance of probably the entire series. The scene, it cuts right when he collapses to the floor. But apparently, this just went

on for several minutes after that happened. [unintelligible 00:43:09] said, "When his character collapses, I remember being alarmed and unsure that the actor was okay. I've never gotten scared like that for another actor's welfare in all my experience. It was chilling to watch."

Sue: I've heard her talk about that several times. I can't imagine what being on that set in that moment was like, especially since they cut so quickly.

Kennedy: Yeah, the scene is heavy for obvious reasons, but the nuances that fuel the scene are so painful. Like, to exist in a room and be gaslit that your existence is less than somehow, or that your contributions are less than or that your experience is only valid if it's measurable in data is like the most painful thing a person can go through. If you want to remove specific ethnicities from it, we still can find parallels across multiple cultures, across multiple times.

When you live in a supremacist society that has this very fascist idea about what's acceptable and what isn't, being told that not only your story isn't good enough because of a bunch of superficial manmade reasons, but that your worth as an individual is now called into question because now you have to worry about your livelihood. Am I going crazy for wanting a better quality of life? Like, that moment, that anguish specifically is something that, if they hadn't told it through the lens of writers in the 50s, would still be as tangible as now, as ever. Perhaps in different ways, certainly. But that scene, just to see it, the audacity of putting it on stage, like we talk all the time about, "Put it on TV, you cowards." Putting that pain, putting that anguish, putting the rawness of that experience on television in the 90s is one of the most courageous things I think *Star Trek* could have done in the individuals included in that decision as well.

Sarah: Yeah. In the original pitch, they ended up publishing the story because of Benny's breakdown. And I'm kind of glad they took that out.

Steven: That would have been unrealistic. First of all, most writers weren't on staff. They wrote like crazy and got paid by the word. So, the idea of firing Benny, I think, that's to help the audience understand what he's going through but doesn't really reflect what was going on with writers of any kind in most of these magazines. They were freelancers.

Sarah: So, the story kind of ends with Sisko back on the station and he's walked in Benny's shoes and now he feels like he can continue to fight the good fight. Does anyone have any thoughts about how they ended that?

Sue: Well, I brought it up a little bit earlier about I'm not sure what the moral is here. And if it is what I think it is, of keep going even though you're feeling broken down because you might be paving a way, I'm not sure that it's necessarily a good one or maybe I should say a healthy one?

Steven: I would think that the moral isn't for Sisko. The moral would be for the audience. I think that the best moral that I would extract from that has to do with having a perspective on your problems such that the viewer-- let's say if the viewer was black, they're on a continuum between the 1950s and the 23rd century, when does *Star Trek* [unintelligible [00:46:48], is it the 23rd century?

Kennedy: 24th.

Steven: 24th century. So, Sisko is out there in the future. We are in the present watching it, watching this shadow play that has been written and performed and broadcast to us, and it is about an event in the 50s. So, from that sense, I think that it is perfectly reasonable to say,

“Yes, there are still problems, but look at the progress we've made. Also, of course, look at how much further we have to go before we get to equality.” I think that being willing to accept that you've made progress without believing that means you can stop is a very valuable thing for human beings.

Sarah: So, there is some additional material. Benny does appear again in season 7, episode 2, *Shadows and Symbols*, where he is in the psych ward, presumably where he was being taken on the ambulance at the end of *Far Beyond the Stars*. And I also wanted to be sure to mention this in this episode. Steven, I want to ask you about what made you decide to add the World's Fair to your novel?

Steven: Well, it was the idea of needing to fill in. What is the story that I could tell that would fill out the book? And I didn't have a lot of time to think about it. So, I really have to give that credit to what Stephen King calls the boys in the basement. When it occurred to me, I was researching something about time, something about the orb. I looked at the years that I could conceivably choose, and if I'm not mistaken, it was coincidental that year was the year of the World's Fair.

And I thought, “Oh, okay, now there's something that I can use that will provide a lot of good symbols, an easily memorable touchstone,” so forth, so that I'm going back into the past, way back into the past, and then in the future, and then the reader is reading it in the present, so that the book is taking place in four different time zones. And it felt like that would give me some symmetry. So, if I'm not mistaken, the World's Fair was serendipitous. That once I'd chosen the approximate time, it jumped out at me and I said, “Oh, it was the World's Fair.”

Sarah: And I also want to ask you. So, when you started writing in the early 80s, you were actually closer to Benny Russell's time than you are to us today. Do you think your experience informed your novelization at all?

Steven: Of course it did. Sure. Absolutely. Like I said, Octavia Butler and I were the only black science fiction writers in the world as far as I knew. It was unspeakably lonely. I can't begin to tell you. I hear people say, “I'm the only black person or the only woman at my company.” That's nice. Try being the only one in the world. It was easy for me to feel that Benny felt like, “I have this talent. I have this genius, I'll change the world. I'll make them see me,” and so forth. That was a battle I went through every day. What does this all mean? Who cares? Am I being a fool? Am I wasting my life? Am I endangering my future? Can people see me? You know, is this a smart way for me to invest my time and energy at the most fertile time in my life?

Wouldn't I be smarter doing something else that has a better chance of success? Because not only am I blocked from getting into certain aspects of the field, but people won't even tell the truth about the fact that I'm blocked. They will hallucinate that black people aren't in the science fiction field because of lack of capacity or interest. They won't say to themselves, “Well, maybe we're part of the problem.” So, the things that Benny was going through, some version or another, I was thinking every day of my life.

Sarah: Well, we're so glad that you did this novelization, that you could join us for the show today.

Steven: My pleasure.

Sarah: Steve, where can people find you on the Internet?

Steven: Well, you could try *stevenbarneslife.com* or. Or you can find me on Amazon if you're interested in Afrofuturism, specifically black people in science fiction, my wife, who's a horror novelist and scholar, an honorary too, have a course in Afrofuturism called just *afrofuturismwebinar.com*. You can check that out.

Sarah: Awesome. And, Kennedy, where can folks find you on the Internet?

Kennedy: You can find me on Twitter, AKA the bird app at that *@mickeychick* M-I-K-E-Y-C-H-I-C-K. Don't act up in my comments though. It's a safe place. No gatekeeping allowed. [laughs]

Sarah: And, Sue, where can folks find you?

Sue: You can find me on Twitter *@spaltor*. That's S-P-A-L-T-O-R.

Sarah: And I'm Sarah. You can find me on Twitter *@sarahmiyoko* S-A-R-A-H-M as in Mary I-Y-O-K O. And you can find my fanzine, Star Trek Quarterly, on Facebook or at *startrekquarterly.wordpress.com*.

To learn more about our show or to contact us, visit *womenatwarp.com* or find us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram *@womenatwarp*. You can also email us at *crew@womenatwarp.com*. And for more Roddenberry podcasts, visit *podcasts.rodnenberry.com*.

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