

# HK sci-fi prize winner denounces 'fascist' and white supremacist tendencies in genre

Hong Kong winner of John W. Campbell sci-fi award stands by 'fascist' comments as new name for accolade is considered

Sunday 20 October 2019, by [CHEUNG Rachel](#) (Date first published: 27 August 2019).

- **In her acceptance speech, Jeannette Ng denounced sci-fi legend Campbell - a known white supremacist - for creating a 'sterile, male, white' genre**
- **The award's sponsor, Dell Magazines, admits it is considering renaming the award and it is only a matter of finding the right time**

Hong Kong science fiction author Jeannette Ng became the city's first to receive the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer last Sunday in Dublin, Ireland, but not without calling out the influential sci-fi writer whom the award is named after as a fascist.

"John W. Campbell ... was a fascist. Through his editorial control of [the magazine] *Astounding Science Fiction*, [Campbell] is responsible for setting a tone of science fiction that still haunts the genre to this day. Sterile. Male. White. Exalting in the ambitions of imperialists and colonisers, settlers and industrialists," said the 33-year-old in her acceptance speech.

Ng, who became the third Chinese author to win the award in its 47-year history with her fantasy novel *Under the Pendulum Sun*, is not the first to be critical of Campbell. Despite having launched the careers of some of the most notable names in sci-fi writing, including Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke and Robert A. Heinlein, the American writer and editor was known as a white supremacist who published essays supporting slavery and segregation. He died in 1971 at the age of 61.

In *Sixth Column*, written by Heinlein and commissioned by Campbell, the United States is invaded by Pan Asians and the story ends with the invention of a race-selective weapon that kills the "slanty" and "flat face".

"Jeannette Ng is one of the people Campbell's fantasy world would have murdered," one online comment bluntly puts it.

There are debates about whether being a racist implies Campbell would have embraced all the tenets of fascism, but most people agree on one thing - despite science fiction being a genre that looks to the future, there is a need to confront its past, however uncomfortable that is.

"Progress cannot be taken for granted and the monsters of the past are not slain with a single blow," Ng told the *Post*. "Part of that progress must involve interrogating the legacy of the Golden Age giants."

Alec Nevala-Lee, biographer of Campbell who scrutinises his life in the book *Astounding*, has already called for a discussion on the renaming of the award since last year.

“This conversation is a necessary and important one,” he says. “There’s no question that his racism – which is undeniable – is fundamentally out of line with the diverse group of writers that the award has recognised in recent years.”

As expected, Ng’s speech at the award ceremony caused a stir in the literary community, where the late author and his works remain widely revered, but Ng stands by her statement.

“Campbell as an editor defined science fiction,” she says. “He literally picked the stories that got published, gave his writers ideas to write up and decided which writers to nurture. Though there were exceptions, he overwhelmingly favoured white men as writers and white men as his heroes.”

The Hong Kong writer sees no contradiction in accepting the award despite her opinion of Campbell. “All I am highlighting is how irrelevant he has become to the award that bears his name,” she says. “The award isn’t about how well you live up to Campbell’s ideals. He’d almost certainly hate my work. And I am proud of that.”

John Scalzi, the 2006 winner of the award, has also come to Ng’s defence.

“You can claim the John W. Campbell Award without revering John W. Campbell, or paying him lip service, and you can criticise him, based on what you see of his track record and your interpretation of it. The award is about the writing, not about John W. Campbell, and that is a solid fact,” he wrote in his blog.

The controversy has not gone unnoticed. Trevor Quachri, editor of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* (the science fiction magazine is owned by Dell Magazines, which sponsors the award), admits he is considering renaming the award and it is only a matter of finding the right time, given it is Analog’s 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year.

“From [Campbell’s] bones, we have grown a wonderful, ramshackle genre. Wilder and stranger than his mind could imagine or allow” - Jeannette Ng

Reading an early draft of Nevala-Lee’s book on Campbell prompted the decision, says Quachri.

“It’s a nuanced account of [one of ] the major figures of the era, which neither papers over their flaws nor reduces them to caricatures. But it does make clear that some of the things that we may have once been able to dismiss as idiosyncrasies or being ‘of their time’ went beyond that.”

Ultimately, the major purpose of the prize is to honour and elevate new writers, which should not be overshadowed by the contentious name of the award. Just as important as recognising how white men like Campbell have limited the voices and perspectives in science fiction is realising and celebrating how things have changed.

“From his bones, we have grown a wonderful, ramshackle genre. Wilder and stranger than his mind could imagine or allow,” Ng said in her speech.

Ng is a strong supporter of the OwnVoices movement – the belief that stories about a marginalised group should be written by authors that share the same identity – and is happy that there is also a growing awareness that “it isn’t just a diversity of writers that matters but also that of editors and publicists, booksellers and librarians”.

An unapologetic fighter for human rights, Ng also pays tribute to Hong Kong protesters – in sci-fi terms, of course.

“Right now, in the most cyberpunk city in the world, protesters struggle with the masked, anonymous storm troopers of an autocratic ‘Empire’. As we speak they are calling for a horological revolution in our time. They have held laser pointers to the skies and tried to impossibly set alight the stars. I cannot help but be proud of them, to cry for them, and to lament their pain,” she says.

And crucial to how the public and global community views the movement is understanding what human rights are, she adds.

“We cannot keep demanding the narrative of perfect victims from protesters. The government does not become less tyrannical, or the protest’s cause less true, the moment a teenager picks up a brick in self-defence,” Ng says.

“Freedoms and rights, like having an accountable government or the right to protest, are very much things we have to fight for - but they are not inherently things to be given to good children who behave.

“They are called rights because they are intrinsic and you do not need to be virtuous to deserve them. They just are.”

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## **Rachel Cheung**

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South China Morning Post

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