

Paul March-Russell

"I am not that": Liminality in the Short Fiction of Joanna Russ

Joanna Russ (1937-2011) is best known for her novel, *The Female Man* (1975), a founding text of cyber-feminism, and her non-fiction, in particular, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983). Yet, the short story played a central role in the development of her science fiction (sf) and her feminist aesthetics, framing her literary career from "Nor Custom Stale" (1959) through to "Invasion" (1996). Apart from Graham Sleight's chapter in Farah Mendlesohn's *On Joanna Russ* (2009), little has been written about Russ' short fiction although stories, such as "When It Changed" (1971) and "Souls" (1983), won sf's biggest awards, and the former is one of the most anthologised and widely cited of contemporary sf stories. Yet, Sarah Lefanu, one of Russ' most astute critics, regards "When It Changed" as a compensatory fantasy, a trial run for the more disruptive *Female Man*. This paper will argue that Russ' novels and short stories contributed equally to the making of her artistic and political aesthetic. Instead, the collage structure of *The Female Man* makes explicit use of the literary fragment and, arguably, features interpolated short fictions whilst interlinked collections, such as *The Adventures of Alyx* (1976) and *Extra (Ordinary) People* (1983), sustain a creative tension between the part and the whole. Russ' short stories regularly make use of innovative techniques that question the stability of identity - a postmodern preoccupation - but which can also be read back into the ineffable appeal of the short story for modernists such as Katherine Mansfield.