

Suzy McKee Charnas, Writer of Feminist Science Fiction, Dies at 83

She was best known for the Holdfast Chronicles, a series about a dystopic world in which once-enslaved women conquer their former male masters.



Suzy McKee Charnas in an undated photo. One reviewer wrote that her four-novel series “reflects 25 years of the development of feminism.”Credit...Tachyon Publications

By [Richard Sandomir](#)

[Suzy McKee Charnas](#), an award-winning feminist science fiction writer who in a four-novel series created a post-holocaust, male-dominated society called the Holdfast that is liberated by an army of women, died on Jan. 2 at her home in Albuquerque. She was 83.

Her cousin David Szanton said the cause was a heart attack. Her death was not widely reported at the time.

Ms. Charnas, whose books were well regarded but who by her account did not make a living from her writing, was best known for her science fiction. But she also wrote vampire fiction, young-adult fantasy novels with women as central characters, and a memoir about taking care of her father in his later years after a long period of estrangement.

In an epic that began with “Walk to the End of the World” (1974) and concluded 25 years later with “The Conqueror’s Child,” Ms. Charnas conceived a dystopic world in which an escaped female slave, Aldera, leads the rebellious Free Fems to brutally conquer and enslave their former male masters. The men had faulted women for the near-destruction of humanity, called the Wasting.

“The Slave and the Free,” encompassed the first two books in Ms. Charnas’s series “The Holdfast Chronicles.” Credit...Macmillan



THE SLAVE AND THE FREE

CONTAINS

Walk to the End of the World AND *Motherlines*
BOOKS ONE AND TWO OF THE *Holdfast Chronicles*

SUZY MCKEE CHARNAS

[The Holdfast Chronicles](#), as the series is called, is unique in feminist science fiction “in that it reflects 25 years of the development of feminism,” [Dunja M. Mohr wrote in the journal Science Fiction Studies](#) in 1999.

“Investigating the raging war of the sexes,” she added, “Charnas does not shy away from describing the slow — and sometimes grim — process of change leading from dystopia to utopia, the painful purging of psychological and physical violence involved.”

The fantasy novelist Polly Shulman wrote [in Salon in 2000](#) that the Holdfast Chronicles “fall squarely in the tradition of feminist utopias/dystopias that produced [Joanna Russ’s ‘The Female Man’](#) or Margaret Atwood’s ‘The Handmaid’s Tale,’ nourishing writers like [Ursula K. Le Guin](#) and [Sheri S. Tepper](#).”

Ms. Charnas did not set out to write a feminist novel. [In an interview](#) with SnackReads, a digital publisher of short fiction, she said “Walk to the End of the World” began as a satire about how top political leaders in Washington would behave while confined to bunkers during a nuclear war and “waiting,” as she put it, “for the results of their stupidity to wipe out the rest of the world so they could come out and repopulate it with the assistants they were sleeping with.”

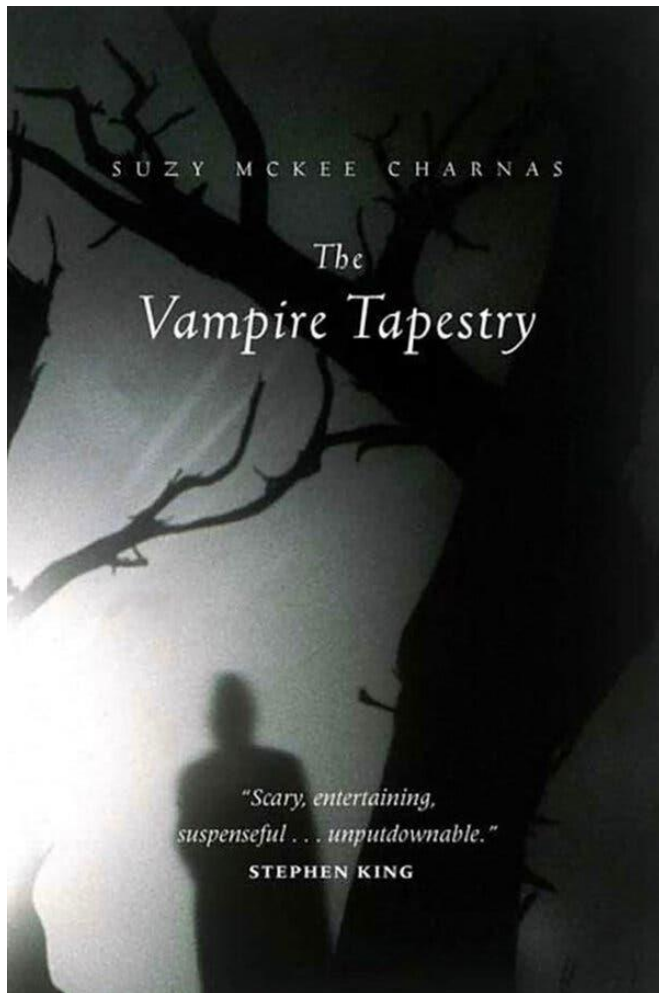
While the book was in progress, she described the story to a women’s consciousness-raising group in New Mexico, explaining that “everybody in the foreground is male” and all the women were slaves.

Then she had an epiphany.

“What are you doing sitting in this room, full of women, talking about women as half the population and writing this story that’s only about the guys?” she recalled saying to herself. “The women in your story are there, but they don’t have a word to say. Not one of them. So I went back and rewrote the whole thing, and this time I gave one of the women, Aldera, a voice, and she told part of the story, and the book changed completely. It became a feminist text.”

The other books in the Holdfast series are “Motherlines” (1978) and “The Furies” (1994). “The Conqueror’s Child” won the 1999 James Tiptree Jr. Award (now called [the Otherwise](#)), a literary prize for works of science fiction or fantasy that explore gender.

She also won two other science fiction and fantasy awards: a Nebula for a novella, “Unicorn Tapestry,” which is a chapter in her 1980 novel, “The Vampire Tapestry,” and the basis for her play, “Vampire Dreams”; and a Hugo for “Boobs,” a short story.



“The Vampire Tapestry” (1980) was the wellspring for a play by Ms. Charnas, “Vampire Dreams.” Credit...Macmillan

“Suzy, to me, was a lot like David Bowie,” said [Jane Lindskold](#), a science fiction and fantasy writer who knew Ms. Charnas from a writers’ group in Albuquerque. “She followed her own muse. She could have just written only vampire books, but she did what she wanted to do.”

Suzy McKee was born on Oct. 22, 1939, in Manhattan. Her parents, Robin and Maxine (Szanton) McKee, were commercial artists who worked at home but divorced when Suzy was 8 years old. Suzy was a voracious reader who also wrote and illustrated stories, often about cowboys.

“It wasn’t that much of a step from that to making up and writing down stories intended for unfolding in other people’s heads — the first true magic I can remember encountering in my life,” [Ms. Charnas said in an interview](#) with the journal Science Fiction Studies in 1999.

After graduating from Barnard College in 1961 with a bachelor’s degree in economics and history — subjects she believed would help her build convincing fictional societies in

her novels — she joined the Peace Corps and taught in Nigeria for two years before earning a master's in teaching from New York University in 1965.

She taught at a private school in Manhattan for a few years before joining Flower-Fifth Avenue Hospital as a curriculum writer for a drug-treatment program in secondary schools. She married Stephen Charnas, a lawyer, in 1968, and soon after moved to Albuquerque.

Ms. Charnas had been an occasional fan of science fiction but began writing in the genre only after reading Ursula Le Guin's 1969 novel, ["The Left Hand of Darkness,"](#) which explored gender themes.

"The book was a mindblower," Ms. Charnas told SnackReads, "not just for me, but for a lot of women, who said, 'Holy crap, look what this woman did! Look what she's talking about!'"

Science fiction was not the only genre Ms. Charnas explored. In "The Vampire Tapestry," she created Dr. Edward Weyland, a vampire posing as an anthropology professor.

Writing in The Washington Post, the fantasy writer [Elizabeth A. Lynn praised the novel](#), saying it "works on many levels — as pure adventure, as social description, as psychological drama and as a passionate exploration of the web that links instinct, morality and culture. It is a serious, startling and revolutionary work."

The director [Guillermo del Toro](#), who is known for his science fiction and horror films, was an admirer of "The Vampire Tapestry." He called it "flawless" on Twitter in 2015 and, after Ms. Charnas's death, said, "It may be her masterpiece."

["Stagestruck Vampires and Other Phantasms"](#) (2004), a collection of her short work, includes a story that rethinks "The Phantom of the Opera" and "Beauty and the Beast." In another, an astronaut at a concert on a faraway planet listens to two lizards discussing the music.

Ms. Charnas is survived by her sisters, Liza McKee and Patricia Powers. Her husband died in 2018.

Her last book was ["My Father's Ghost: The Return of My Old Man and Other Second Chances"](#) (2002), about how she and her husband brought her long-absent father — he had left her family when she was a child — to live on their property in Albuquerque, and her struggle to get to know him over nearly 20 years.

"The person who came to live next door to me was less my father than my father's ghost: the ghost of my father as I had known him and imagined him all my life," she wrote. "He was also, I suspect, the ghost of the man he himself had set out to be but never became."

She added, "Well, I'm a lucky devil: He was a good ghost, an instructive ghost."