

The complete collection of Kate Wilhelm's
stories from Damon Knight's Orbit Anthologies

KATE WILHELM
in ORBIT

Volume One

With a special introduction by
GORDON VAN GELDER

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KATE WILHELM IN ORBIT - VOLUME ONE

Kate Wilhelm

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All of the stories in Kate Wilhelm in Orbit - Volume One were first published between 1966 and 1971 in the Orbit series of science fiction anthologies, edited by Damon Knight.

This collection includes: Staras Flonderans; Baby You Were Great; The Planners; Windsong; Somerset Dreams; The Chosen; A Cold, Dark Night with Snow; April Fool's Day Forever; The Encounter; and The Infinity Box.

First edition.

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Kate Wilhelm in Orbit

VOLUME ONE

Kate Wilhelm

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Introduction

I can't recall the event, but sometime in the 1990s, James Sallis and Kate Wilhelm met up after long years of being out of touch. (Most likely it was at a mystery convention.) They spoke of the short stories they wrote in the 1970s and both of them said, "I'd write more stories like that if there was any market for it nowadays."

But the 1990s were not the 1970s and venues like *Orbit* were scarce. Venues like *Orbit* are scarce in any decade—editors like Damon Knight don't come along too often. In fact, one of the greatest compliments I've received in my career remains the time Kate said to me, "You edit my stories with the same sort of care and attention Damon did."

The *Orbit* anthologies were published between 1966 and 1980. As it happens, those were the first fourteen years of my life, so I wasn't reading the books as they were published. Indeed, as these things happen, I only got turned on to science fiction in 1980, due in part to my discovery of another Damon Knight anthology—a book called *The Dark Side* that I came across in a used bookstore in Carlsbad, New Mexico.

I was, however, shaped by reading stories from those *Orbit* anthologies—"The Secret Place" by Richard McKenna, "Mother to the World" by Richard Wilson, "I Gave Her Sack and Sherry" by Joanna Russ, "Shattered Like a Glass Goblin" by Harlan Ellison, "Continued on the Next Rock" by R. A. Lafferty and so on, and so forth, and add a heap of additional "so on's to that list.

And Kate Wilhelm's stories.

Through the twenty-one volumes of *Orbit*, Kate provided stories for nineteen of them. Her work was to the books what Diane Keaton was to Woody Allen's 1970s films, what Diana Ross was to Motown. Her stories anchor the books; the nineteen stories she contributed

to *Orbit* form the center or backbone of the anthologies as surely as de Camp's and Heinlein's work defined Astounding in Campbell's golden era.

And what a run they were! The stories assembled here—as you'll soon see—are as good an assemblage of fantastic fiction as you're likely to find anywhere, from apocalyptic futures to uncanny travels, from light comedic surrealism to the darkest psychological insights. There are a lot of scientific experiments here, and a lot of grim visions of the future. Some of them—like that of “The Red Canary”—are diminished by the grim realities we've experienced since the stories were first published. More of them, however, are amplified in 2015 by the breadth and depth of vision Kate shared four decades ago.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are indeed our crises.

What struck me most as I reread these stories is how fully they epitomize the type of science fiction that picked up the “humanist” label in the 1980s. It's easy to forget now the extent to which science fiction was a tech-heavy body of work meant for young men who dreamed of flying to the stars. I recently read a batch of SF magazines from the 1950s and it jolted me to realize how thoroughly science fiction of 2015 has embraced and embodied the literary virtues that *Orbit* showcased: an interest in average people facing extraordinary situations, a passion for human interests in the face of scientific or technological change. I suspect there's a great number of writers now—many working in the fertile field of Young Adult fiction—who are scarcely aware of the debt they owe to Kate Wilhelm and other *Orbit* and New Wave writers for paving the way for their dystopias and their cautionary speculations. It would be fatuous to suggest that today's numerous Young Adult dystopian novels would not exist without Kate Wilhelm's influence. However, it's entirely fair to wonder if these books today would be so good if Kate had not set such a high standard with tales.

Personally, I think they would not.

As long as I'm offering such opinions, let me note one other thing that struck me on reading these stories, something very personal. See, after twelve years as a book editor and eighteen at the helm of F&SF, I'm not the same reader I once was. Technique matters more to me now; I'm as likely to notice individual brushstrokes

as I am to admire the sweep of the whole canvas. Consequently, on those occasions when I go back to read works I enjoyed in my youth, I approach them with trepidation and I usually come away with disappointment.

Considering how vividly I remember reading *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* on my bed in suburban New Jersey in 1981 (remembering how I looked up from the world of the book and watched the shadows of leaves dance across the sheets, remembering how disquieted and awestruck I felt), it's no surprise I put off rereading that story until last.

What is surprising is how much better the story is than I remembered. Elements of the story that went over my head when I was fourteen landed squarely between my ears this time. Subtleties had become profundities.

There are some bleak futures imagined in these stories, but sometimes we make a future better.

I hope you find these stories as rewarding as I do.

—Gordon Van Gelder

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Staras Flonderans

(Orbit 1 — 1966)

The great ship had picked up an uneven coating of space debris. Her once silver sides were scabrous with the detritus of ancient collisions and explosions; planetary, stellar, galactic rubble that had been hurled out from high velocity impacts, or from even more furious paroxysms of novas and supernovas to hurtle through space until the minute gravitational field of the ship netted speeding dust motes and drew them to her sides. A gaping rent on one side of her, and many dents and scars, told of blind passage through the littered reaches. The ship was spinning erratically, not on her own axis to give interior gravity, but with a lopsided, over-her-left shoulder tumble. There was still enough silver left for her to reflect some of the starlight when the

patrol boat first sighted her visually.

She had been a blip on the scanner a long time before. She was close enough to view on the screen. The three men watching her were silent while she tumbled twice; they were satisfied she was the dead ship they were after. A luxury liner had first spotted her. The captain had made no attempt to board, but had plotted her course and filed a report.

“She’s right on schedule,” Conly said. His voice was harsh and abrupt. He was big, more than six feet tall, two hundred pounds or more, with bold features—a too large nose, square thrusting chin, ears that stood away from his shaved head, a high heavy forehead, and wide grey eyes that gave him a false look of feline cruelty. He was in command of the Fleet scout craft.

As Conly turned from the screen, Malko, the second man watching, whistled softly between his teeth. Shorter than Conly, he was more massive, with a great heavily muscled chest, bulging biceps and leg muscles, spatulate fingers. His legs, arms and chest were covered with black curly hair. He had a curling beard and heavy, black eyebrows. His eyes were dark blue; there were many crinkle lines of laughter on his face, about his eyes.

The third man was not a human. He was Staeen. The Chlaesan observer. He, also, turned from the screen and watched Conly take his place before the controls. Staeen was much shorter than either of his companions, although, if he chose, he could elongate himself to their height. Staeen drew his mantle closer about his body and flowed toward his own couch. He was shaped like an inverted tulip when he gathered his mantle about him. The mantle looked like dark grey leather. Under it his body parts were soft and pink; his brain was encased in more leathery covering, as were his tentacles. His eyes were close to his body now, but they could extend; the eyeballs had transparent protectors over them. His upper half served as a sense organ, like an ear, with inner parts complex mazes of tubes membranes, chambers. The organ allowed him to feel vibrations well above and below the human range of hearing. Staeen knew his human companions were considered handsome among their own kind; he was beautiful in the eyes of his people. When he got to his couch, he flowed up onto it, then let himself settle down to a slightly raised

mound of leather. He sealed the mantle.

“Ready?” Conly asked. They would accelerate to approach the derelict, lock on to her and investigate from her stem to her stern.

Malko grunted, and Staeen said, “Let’s go.” Under his mantle was a two-way radio that had been modified so that it amplified his chest vibrations and translated them into sounds that were intelligible to the humans.

Conly brought the small scout closer to the great ship, matching her speed until they were side by side. The slow tumble of the crippled ship caused her to wobble as she turned over. She had passed through a region of heavy dust and rocks; the damage done to her was extensive, with several holes in the forward section where the engine room and controls were located. Conly cursed harshly. Malko grunted, glanced at Staeen and said, “Life-boat pods are empty. She’s abandoned, all right.”

“They left her on manual,” Conly said. “If she’d been on automatic, the computer would have dodged all that junk. She must be hotter than hell.”

He began the approach maneuver, guiding the scout toward the rear of the ship, away from the engine section and the radioactivity. Malko and Conly made a good team. Staeen felt wave after wave of worry come from Malko, while Conly sent nothing during the difficult approach. It took skillful handling to bring the small boat to the right place, but he edged in, first a foot at a time, then inch by inch until it seemed they could reach out and touch the other ship. Staeen watched with admiration as the ship started to come nearer them, her tumbling motion completing the maneuver. Conly adjusted the control, lifting the scout slightly, and when the two met, the jar was so slight that it might have been imagined rather than felt.

“That’s, that.” Conly said, locking the scout in place magnetically. “Let’s eat first, then board her and see what’s what.”

While the two humans prepared and ate their rations, Staeen turned to gaze out the port. Unlike species most often preferred not to watch one another partake of food, or perform other bodily functions. He knew his mouth parts were disgusting to the humans. Under his mantle his tentacles fed capsules into the pink mouth parts that moved rhythmically, and he stared with delight at the unwind-

ing scene passing before his eyes. The tumble of the ship they now shared seemed gone; all motion had been imparted to the stars about them, but it was a curious motion. It was as if a black velvet cloth were being carried past him, making a slow twist and then settling very slowly downward.

His people had known space for thousands of years, so long they no longer regarded it as a thing to be conquered. They were almost as much at home in space as they were on the surface of their worlds, of the in the depths of their oceans. Evolution, in fashioning their mantles, had adapted them to any environment, even, for short lengths of time, to a vacuum. Because they always adapted themselves rather than their surroundings, and because of their generosity and open goodwill, they were much loved by the various races of the galaxy.

When the Flonderans had come to Chlaesan, they had been greeted with friendliness and amusement. So eager, so impulsive, so childlike. The name Earthmen was rarely used for them; they remained the Flonderans, the children. It amused Staeen to think that when they had still been huddling in caves, more animal than man, his people already had mapped the galaxy; when they had been floundering with sails on rough seas, engrossed in mapping their small world, his people already populated hundreds of planets, light-years away from each other.

When the Flonderans burst on the Galactic scene, enthusiastic, vocal, boisterous even, they had been welcomed as children. Suspicious, prepared for rejection, for animosity, warfare, they had been met with patience and love. The Chlaesan loved the little Flonderans. The Chlaesans pitied the intelligent, short-lived Flonderans who had neither the longevity to learn from and enjoy what they found, nor the collective cooperation of a colonial organism that could ultimately share fully every experience felt by any part of itself.

It was doubly amusing to consider that the mathematicians and philosophers had proved that a race so short lived, so individually contained as the race of Flonderans could not possibly have been viable, and being viable could not possibly have advanced to the degree of intelligence that permitted space travel.

Blithely the Flonderans pushed on and out, oblivious to the dangers of space, to the improbability of their being in space. They went

wearing guns, but they seldom had occasion to use them. This sector of the galaxy was peaceful, had been peaceful for thousands of years.

“Staeen,” Malko said suddenly, “haven’t your people ever come across a derelict like this?”

“Not just like this,” Staeen said. “Not just left empty. There have been ships with plague, accidents, otherlife aboard, but not one where they simply left it.”

“This is the second for us,” Conly said. “This is how they found the first one—lifeboats gone, ship damaged by space after the crew left.” His voice sounded brutal. “Staeen, why don’t you stay here? This is our problem.”

Staeen was not made for smiling and they could not feel the sympathy he was sending. He said, “Your problems are our problems now, Conly.” Affection-waves washed over him and his pink parts under the mantle glowed red with pleasure.

Malko made a deep throat noise that was untranslatable. “Stay with us, you hear? Between us. We don’t know what we might find in there. You understand?”

Staeen understood. They wanted to protect him. He quivered with pride and happiness. He said, “I am under your orders. Whatever you say.”

“Okay,” Conly said. “We suit up and go in through the air lock. We’ll have to put the rad-suits on. Some of the ship’s hotter than hell.” He looked doubtfully at Staeen. It made them uneasy that the Chlaesans needed no space suits. “Will you know when you have to get the hell out?”

“I’ll know.” Staeen said, his voice gentle through the apparatus that sent sound to the two men. While they suited up, he thought of the comparable lifetimes of the two species. He had been fully adult when Rome was building an empire, now thousands of years later, the Flonderans, who could expect to die in what was to him a flicker of a tentacle, were being solicitous of him. They were born, matured, died in less time than it took for his world to make one swing around the sun. Malko called him; they were ready.

They left the scout and floated along the big ship’s hull toward the airlock. Conly was familiar with her design and led them through the outer door to the first of three chambers. The outermost one had

been damaged, but the other two were functioning perfectly, and the radiation from space had dropped to normal by the time they had gone through the last.

The ship was a standard transport-passenger model, discontinued seventy years ago. The emphasis had been on transport with this model; the corridor was narrow and closely lined with oval doors, some of them open to show cramped sleeping quarters, three hammocks to a cubicle. In some rooms television screens were uncovered, as if the watchers had only stepped out for a beer. Papers on a tabletop drew Conly: an unfinished letter to a girlfriend. In the mess hall the tables were set, waiting for the crew. The feeling of overcrowding persisted.

The tumble of the ship caused a slight pull of centrifugal force so the men were constantly shifting their positions, now having one of the door-lined walls “down,” now the floor, then the ceiling. They went single file with Staeen between them. Conly led them through the ship, corridor after corridor of the oval doors, up the stairs when they found the elevators were not working, more corridors. Everything they saw appeared in working order, neat and clean, except for one or two places near portholes, where Malko picked up a chess piece and a plasti-book. Only where meteorites had struck and entered, some lodging, some passing through and out again, was there actual disorder.

Finally they approached the control room. Conly’s radiation detection unit clicked angrily. “Malko, keep watch. I’ll go in.” he said.

“And I,” Staeen said. He could not see either of their faces, but they were sending washes of courage and bewilderment. He wished he had hands with which to pat and soothe them. He caught a wave of regret from Malko who pushed himself backward to hang, drifting gently, away from the hot area of the door.

Conly motioned to Staeen to follow and passed through the doorway into the control room. Staeen could feel the radiation like a warm yellow sun against his mantle; presently there was a change in the makeup of the covering and he could no longer feel anything through it.

“What the—?” Conly muttered. A fire had raged through the control room. Black dust dotted the space they moved through, the

flakes stirring when they were touched. Conly studied the control panel that was left, cursing under his breath. "Like I thought," he said. "The sons of bitches didn't even set it on automatic, just walked away from it. None of the safeties operative... damn fools. Explains the radiation in here."

Staeen floated from him toward the next door that led into a safety corridor surrounding the engine room. He was stopped by another flow of radiation. The change to his mantle was longer in coming this time, the feeling of sun warmth stronger. Conly followed him.

"No," Staeen said, "it is too hot even for the suit."

Conly worked a panel back from the wall and they both looked through the thick window that had been bared, through the corridor and into the engine room. A large meteorite lay in the corridor, lodged between the two walls, smaller ones had hit in the engine room. The ship turned, and one of the rocks slid from its resting place, moving very slowly to stop against the ruined machinery of the engines. Staeen felt a flare of warmth as it hit. He touched Conly gently with his rippling mantle, and they backed away from the window together.

Three days later, after their fifth trip inside the ship, as Staeen relaxed in his special cubicle where a five percent saline-ammonia mist played over his mantle, he listened to Conly and Malko talking.

"You can put it together," Conly said. "Something happened and they left, just ran out, leaving everything exactly as they were using it. No safeties on, no automatic control, nothing. The ship was empty when the meteorite hit the engine. The alarm system went off, but no one was here to do anything. It's still in alert condition. Another meteorite knocked out the controls for it, shorted the wiring and caused the fire in the control room."

Staeen sighed. A layer of his mantle sloughed off and was flushed away. He turned off the mist then and joined the Flonderans. He felt very well and healthy. His mantle was a shiny black now.

"You okay?" Conly asked. He was standing at the port; he turned when Staeen came in, and at Staeen's affirmative ripple of his mantle, he again directed bitter eyes toward space as if hoping to see the answer there. "Why? Why would the captain order the ship abandoned?"

Did he order it even? Not a sign of attack. No weapons out...?”

“Capture of the entire crew?” Staeen said.

Conly shrugged again. “They would have put up resistance. You’ve read our psychology books, and our histories. You’ve been out on five recon missions with Malko and me. Do you think Earthmen are cowards?”

Staeen knew they were not. Fear, if present, would beat against him like a storm tide on an ocean shore. No such waves emanated from them.

“If they had been threatened, they would have fought,” Malko said. “If they had to outrun something, why the life boats? Why not the ship itself? There was nothing wrong with it! Nothing! All that damage was done after they left, because they left.”

Conly returned to his contour seat, kicked it and then let himself drop to it. He stared at the control panel and said heavily, “Let’s give her one more going over, then we turn back.”

Malko grunted; his finger combed through his beard abstractly. Staeen could feel their disappointment and restlessness. Like children, he thought again. If they could not have the answer, they did not want the question. Unlike his own people who loved paradoxes and puzzles for their own sake, the Flonderans grew annoyed with unanswered questions. It was because of their short lives, he decided. They knew they could not afford the thousands of years it sometimes took to find the answer.

“How many small craft were aboard the mother ship?” he asked.

Conly shifted to stare at him. His voice was a snarl when he said, “We should have thought of that! They took every lifeboat, scout, landing craft, everything! There were eighteen to twenty lifeboats and half a dozen other miscellaneous craft aboard. They knew they couldn’t last more than four days in the landing craft...”

“Even the repair boats,” Malko said. “They’re gone. Six hours, eight at the most in space in one of those...”

Staeen looked at the hairy man and felt waves of dread coming from him. Six to eight hours in space, and then death from anoxia. He shuddered inside his mantle.

Brusquely Conly said, “Okay, let’s get back. This time we split up and go through private quarters. Try to find a note, a scrap of paper,

a scrawl on the wall, anything that might give us a clue. Staeen—”
“I too can search,” Staeen said.

Alone inside the great ship, Staeen let himself go, let it come to him. Hanging in a corridor with the oval doors, he thought of nothing, not even the sensations he received. He looked like a black shadow unanchored to reality as he hung there, shiny black slowly changing to a duller shade as his mantel adapted to the radiation. From a distance he felt echoes of doubts and apprehensions: Malko’s waves.

From another direction came fainter wafts of determination mixed with the same doubts, perhaps even a touch of fear, formless and unnamed as yet. For a brief time he was one with the ship: unguided, unmanned, alone in space on a course that would take it beyond the galaxy to the nothingness that lay between the oases of life. He shuddered with the ship, feeling the vibration of the metal under the impacts from meteorites, sharp-edged bits of metallic ores set loose in space to roam forever until captured or destroyed.

He felt the weight of the galaxy weighing on himself as bits and pieces of space debris hit the ship and clung, giving it mass. He knew that one day there would be enough mass so that planetoids could be captured, under pressure the ship at the core would be crushed and finally molten. It would sweep the path of its trajectory and its gravitational field would reach out father and farther, insatiably then, and in a million years, or one thousand million, it would be caught by a hungry sun. Resisting for a while the end of its freedom in space, it would refuse a stable orbit, but in time would become a captive like all planets. Staeen wondered if it would give birth to creatures who would pose questions of cosmology, wondering at the earth below them, at its origin, its eventual death.

Staeen continued to hang in the corridor, and now sensations too faint to be identified drifted to him. The temptation to strain to receive them better was great, but he resisted; it would be like straining too hard to hear a whisper only barely within hearing range. One either heard it, or did not. He let feelings enter him without trying to sort them out.

Emotions had been expressed with every footstep, with every grasp of a door handle, every yank on a drawer, with every shout and

curse uttered by the men preparing to abandon ship. The ship had vibrated a different tempo of emotions, and some of the vibrations still echoed along the molecules. Staeen intercepted them with his body and after a long time without movement, he stirred, his mantle rippling slightly as he shifted his position. A great sadness filled him because he knew the answer he found could not be accepted by the Flonderans. In the madness of fear the crew had left the ship.

What, or whom, had they feared to the point of insanity?

Staeen pondered that as he started to investigate the rooms assigned to him. He expected to find nothing, but his search was methodical. He had offered to help to the best of his ability and would do so.

He found nothing in any of the rooms he searched. Now and again a stronger wave of the same crawling, irrational fear bathed him when he opened a door that had been closed since the ship was abandoned, but there was nothing to indicate its source.

Malko and Conly were depressed and irritable when they returned to the scout. Staeen soaked in his mist of salt, ammonia and water blissfully while the Flonderans unsuited and decontaminated their suits. The three gathered in the cabin afterward.

“I’m going to call it a bust,” Conly said, running his hand over his shaved head. He looked tired and dejected.

Malko simply nodded. Scowl lines cut into his dark face and his deep eyes were shadowed. “Read about ocean ships found like that,” he said. “It looked like everyone just quit whatever he was doing and jumped over the side. No explanation ever given, far’s I know.”

End of sample pages



Kate Wilhelm

Kate Wilhelm's first short story, "The Pint-Sized Genie" was published in *Fantastic Stories* in 1956. Her first novel, *More Bitter Than Death*, a mystery, was published in 1963. Over the span of her career, her writing has crossed over the genres of science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy and magical realism, psychological suspense, mimetic, comic, family sagas, a multimedia stage production, and radio plays. She has recently returned to writing mysteries with her Barbara Holloway and the Charlie Meiklejohn and Constance Leidl Mysteries novels. Her works have been adapted for television, theater, and movies in the United States, England, and Germany. Wilhelm's novels and stories have been translated to more than a dozen languages. She has contributed to *Redbook*, *Quark*, *Orbit*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Locus*, *Amazing*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Ellery Queen's Mysteries*, *Fantastic Stories*, *Omni* and many others.

Kate and her husband, Damon Knight (1922-2002), also provided invaluable assistance to numerous other writers over the years. Their teaching careers covered a span of several decades, and hundreds of students, many of whom are famous names in the field today. Kate and Damon helped to establish the Clarion Writer's Workshop and the Milford Writer's Conference. They have lectured together at universities in North and South America and Asia. They have been the guests of honor and panelists at numerous conventions around the world. Kate continues to host monthly workshops, as well as teach at other events. She is an avid supporter of local libraries.

Kate Wilhelm lives in Eugene, Oregon.