

To Build a Tunnel* by Deborah K Frontiera (originally published 2000, with second edition in 2004 and 15th anniversary edition in 2019) as volume one of *The Chronicles of Henry Roach-Dairier

From Fandom to Full Cultural Foundation

Review by Mack Hassler

In modern times, we often label this sort of enthusiastic imitation of types “fandom” as in science fiction fandom or mystery writing fandom. Probably from the early beginnings of our literature such emulation has existed. Readers love what Vergil does and so try to produce something similar in their own work, or they love Dante or Milton and try the same imitation. In the best cases, the fans grow into real masters themselves. Isaac Asimov was a great fan, and then he wrote his *Foundation Trilogy*, which in turn other readers wanted to imitate. And so, he helps to found a “literature” on the “big story” or national epic. The dynamic reaches back to Homer’s stories and still continues. Again, it was Asimov to suggest a new twist that turns out, also in modern times, to be a marketing twist. He said that “the golden age” for imaginative, big story reading is our teenage years when we are young readers and thinkers. So, for our times, many of the new big stories are marketed as “Young Adult Fiction.” This book and its sequels, just like the “Harry Potter” fantasies and the “Ring” series by Tolkien are marketed as YA fiction. But they really are epic imitations with all the philosophic resonance that goes with that category. One result is that it helps to define the real literature for a group of readers, and this has political, social, and cultural implications for unifying that people. I think this is a bit of a step up from the entertainment industry and just the economics of making books for sale. It is a real cultural effort to find readers who will recognize and identify with a literature that makes them believe more in their identity and to value the writer for helping them with that belief. Vergil did this for the Romans. Dante for the Italians. Cervantes for the Spanish. Pope for the 18th-century Enlightenment people. Melville for the 19th-century Americans. Joyce for the Irish. Even the language differences are overcome by good translation so that those of us who are not Romans feel like a part of that community when we read Vergil’s thought at the start of his *Aeneid*, “...how hard it was to found the race of Rome” (Book one, line 33).

I think UP readers are very lucky that Deborah K. Frontiera, who has published a variety of works dealing with her native UP, had the teenage haunt of a big story about over-sized insects that rule a future Earth with nice resonance to ancient legends about “giants in the Earth” as well as to the little people whom legends about adaptation and evolution on Earth allude to. In the literature of big story, it is difficult to contain evolutionary and development stories in strict time frames outside of legend. The “wrinkles” in time make them almost read like hallucinations, or nearly timeless possibilities. Dante’s numerological circles seem to spin at any and all moments of time. Milton’s Hell is eternal. Frontiera wrote up that ant haunt in a three-volume big story. The final volume in the series has already been reviewed by Victor R. Volkman. He emphasized the ethical and political elements that Frontiera built into the story. I will attempt to relate her work to earlier big story and epic tradition and to the interesting formal characteristics in such stories and to their effects and values as fannish book making at the base of other national literatures. My assumption is that a UP literature may be ready for such an approach.

I have done enough reading into Frontiera's research on the morphology of her Ant species and Cockroaches and their dietary needs for the plastics that we "duopods" had invented during our tenure on the planet to know that her thinking moves far beyond the teenage level of knowledge. She extrapolates well so that her big story can hardly be described in scientific detail within the confines of this review. What she does do in the literary tradition of the epic or big story is equally ambitious as her science. She echoes moves in rhetoric and apparatus to introduce her story in the wonderful bookishness that allows it to speak well for a specific community or colony. Like "pius Aeneas" in Vergil's poem, her chief narrator is continually burdened with sadness. With a complicated and mixed genealogy, Henry Roach-Dairier, who is related to the fascist insects as well as to the "milking" good farmer and ant feeder, writes in the sort of "prologue" early in this volume, "... by presenting all the viewpoints of this unfortunate time, I can further nurture the seeds of healing." (P. 7) Further, just as Dante uses the Vergilian hero as his guide through the underworld, Henry is the teller of the long journey of discovery and movement through the tunnels and the archaeology associated with mining plastics that, also, allows all the characters the "Rosetta stone" of reading the documents of the extinct duo-pods. Like so many big stories, the forward movement allows the reader to be a witness at his own burial. These several volumes (like Byron's *Don Juan*), it has grown longer in the number of volumes than the original Trilogy. The medium, of course, is not verse but rather prose like Gulliver's big story, and Melville's cetology, and Joyce's *Ulysses*. The book making, finally, is very attractive like the modern tradition of the science fiction illustration—great cover art, maps, a feel for the visual. Whether or not the work will speak as the big story for the new colony of UP literature will depend on the readership. It has already won some fan awards. We shall see. I like the whole dynamic. I think Henry is a great worker ant narrator over a long narrative in the "pius Aeneas" tradition of a founder.