

Globe Review

**Jerry Lewis
no match
for TV's
King**

**ANDREW RYAN,
R2**



**Cashing
in on
Triple A
league**

**RADIO NICHE,
R3**

THE GLOBE AND MAIL ■ CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER ■ GLOBEANDMAIL.COM ■ MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2003



Sharon Manelle inspects her costume — Solitaire, Queen of the Desert Planet Kaladar — for the World Science Fiction Convention in Toronto. She is holding a picture of herself wearing the same costume at a convention 20 years ago.

DONALD WEBER/GLOBE AND MAIL

A genre in a time warp

The weird thing about sci-fi fans gathered in Toronto for their world convention is how focused they are on the past — odd for a group famous for changing the present by predicting the future

BY HAL NIEDZVIECKI

You have to invent a species that is weirder than humans ...” quips science-fiction author Edward M. Lerner, “and that’s hard.”

Sitting in a conference room of the Metro Convention Centre, 100-plus fans are politely listening to a panel discussion on the travails and rewards of “designing an alien species.” Various dilemmas are encountered, such as, if you have an aquatic space-exploring race that needs to travel on the surface of a planet with atmosphere, what would they wear? Would the glare of sun and clouds blind them? Wouldn’t they be agoraphobic?

The three panelists chat as hands anxiously wave in the air, audience members eager to contribute a clever detail. The atmosphere is polite, informational, utterly safe. We could be at a shareholders’ meeting

or conference of dentists.

But the scene is the World Science Fiction Convention (WorldCon), science fiction’s annual global gathering, held this year in Toronto (it was last held here in 1973). Pedestrian and plodding, WorldCon (it wraps up today), may or may not represent the state of science fiction in North America. But I can’t help thinking that Lerner, however unintentionally, has hit on something crucial to understanding the convention and the genre.

In the age of rogue dictators hoarding theoretical weapons of mass destruction, at a time when the most futuristic catastrophes and plagues seem to regularly touch down on the planet, in a Toronto strung together by high-speed Internet and enlivened by figures like the near-mythical University of Toronto professor and cyborg Steve Mann, what weirder scenarios can science fiction give us?

What fictional creatures would successfully illuminate the difficulties of surviving the future better than the humans of today?

Is this the dilemma that I feel hanging over the drab convention centre? Or is it merely my own perception of an event that feels like it can’t quite decide what it is? Part social occasion rife with after-hours parties, part literary festival complete with readings and signings, and part subculture haven for fans of furrins and filking (I’ll leave you to explore those on your own), WorldCon seems insulated from current events and focused on the past — an odd situation for a gathering celebrating a medium famed for changing the present by predicting the future.

The first person I talk to at the event, officially known as TorCon3 to reflect that this is the third time Worldcon has been in Toronto, is Frank Dietz. He hails from near Atlanta and proudly wears his pass for the premier 1948 TorCon around his neck. Dietz was in his teens at the time, which makes him around 70, I’m guessing. He tells the familiar story of a lifetime with sci-fi: He started reading stories in the pulp mags of the day, and got hooked. The next thing he knew, he was attending 12 conferences a year.

Like many people I talk to, his in-

terest is partly that of a typical fan — meeting authors, keeping up with what is being published — and partly social: The Con is a place where friends from around the world renew their acquaintance. I ask Dietz how perceptions of science fiction have changed since the first Toronto event of a few hundred fans in 1948. He notes that reports in newspapers have become less hysterical, the sci-fans are no longer considered on the fringes of sanity. “We now know it is possible to get up into space,” he says. “So . . .”

The implication is clear. As technology has come to mirror the prediction of such things as men on the moon, genetic mutation, and even *Star Trek* communicators (aka the cellphone), science fiction has earned the respectability that comes from being useful. At one panel, a sci-fi editor told the story of a company that read of an invention proposed in a novel, then actually went out and had the thing for sale a year later.

Science fiction isn’t just head-in-the-stars stuff any more. And while it still carries with it the patina of geekdom, it is the same kind of geekdom one feels at, say, a film festival or a gallery opening; that is, collections of people insulated from reality by their collective assu-

rance that their particular pursuit matters as an art form way more than it really does.

Clippings from newspapers reporting on past Toronto conferences are displayed amid a vast array of old fanzines, and other paraphernalia from the early days of the genre. To read them is to instantly understand the difference in perception Dietz evokes.

Writes George Bain of *The Globe and Mail*, describing that 1948 conference: “Two men in one corner were earnestly discussing werewolves; a group of three was lost somewhere in outer space on a jaunt between Mars and the Moon.” This was, no doubt, meant to shock and surprise us: grown men talking monsters and manned space flight! Today, those conversations on a crowded subway car would hardly elicit a second glance. The *Toronto Star* headline for TorCon2 in 1973 says: “3,000 sci-fans are here and they’re weird, just weird.” But as Dietz notes about the fans of today: “We’re not weird. We’re just ordinary people who like science fiction and fantasy.”

I go searching for the weird at a conference expecting about 4,000 attendees, according to volunteer chair, Hamiltonian Peter Jarvis.

See SCI-FI on page R5

Back to the future of science fiction

SCI-FI from page R1

But moving through the crowd, I am struck at how normal everybody looked. There are a few people dressed up as characters I don't recognize, but for the most part, this appears to be a conservative crowd whose median age is probably 45. I stop to chat with two women perusing the row of author photos and bios in the back of the large hall. They are both above that median age, dressed comfortably in slacks and T-shirts. From the Ottawa area, they have the feel of retirees at the mall.

"We're all geeks of course," laughs grey-haired Beulah. "I told my sister I was going to a science-fiction convention and as my costume I was going to wear my dragon T-shirt. And she said, 'You're weird. You're really weird.'"

Only thing is, in a tasteful black T-shirt adorned with silver dragon, accompanied by librarian Lyn and her autograph book (she shows me a Ray Bradbury from way back when), Beulah seems completely normal. Where once adults who read and talked sci-fi seemed like perpetual adolescents, they now come across as exceedingly mature compared to the legions of grown-

ups who devote themselves to pursuits ranging from bungee jumping to Elvis impersonation.

I drop in on a panel discussion about the relationship between science fiction and academia. It's surprisingly full — standing room only. Though the discussion begins by lamenting the fact that it can be difficult to get courses about science fiction taught in universities or even high schools, the tone quickly changes as it becomes apparent just how many people in the room are actually teaching courses on just that subject.

Indeed, choice ranges from a York University course in Apocalyptic Science Fiction to Dalhousie University courses in the origins of Modern European Science Fiction and a course offered by the English Department called, simply, Science Fiction ("non-majors welcome"). A panelist from Australia says she knows of several people doing PhD theses on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Later on, I meet Kim Greyson, a Calgary English teacher who is looking for ideas for using science fiction in the classroom. He tells me that authors such as Toronto's Robert Sawyer are extremely helpful in that regard, and that some writers,

Sawyer wins Hugo Award

Canadian Robert Sawyer took home the best novel of the year prize at the 50th presentation of the Hugo Awards on Saturday night, the annual awards for science-fiction writing.

Sawyer was presented with the award at the World Science Fiction Convention in Toronto for his novel *Hominids*, about a portal in Sudbury, Ont., between Earth and

another world, in which Neanderthals survived in place of humans. Sawyer, the author of 15 novels, was previously nominated for a Hugo seven times.

Neil Gaiman took the best novella award for *Coraline*.

Best novelette went to Michael Swanwick for *Slow Life* and Geoffrey Landis won best short story for his work *Falling onto Mars*. CP

fiction, *Oryx and Crake*, was paral-

lled by the severe acute respiratory syndrome scare and a non-fiction book exploring possible premises for future apocalypse. Literary types often turn to science-fiction. At WorldCon, venerable Canadian lit-mag *Descant* was promoting a newly published issue on none other than speculative literature.

Canada even has its own academic conference on science fiction. Chaired by York University professor and sci-fi writer Allan Weiss, that conference happened the day before WorldCon. Its keynote speaker was Margaret Atwood, who has noted that her recent foray into end-of-the-world speculative

says. "Top-grossing movies are sci-fi films, you can't seem to escape it any more, it influences everything from commercials to the design of buildings." But traditionally science fiction has done more than just inspire inventors and entertain, it has also been a venue for outsider social agendas.

One panel at Weiss's academic conference dealt with the late Judith Merril, a groundbreaking feminist sci-fi writer whose memoir (co-written with her granddaughter Emily Pohl-Weary), is in parts a feverish recounting of the heady period when science fiction, with its exploration of sexual and gender stereotypes, was in the vanguard of challenging cultural norms. The book, *Better to Have Loved*, won a Hugo Award Saturday night in the best related book category.

Today, it is hard to imagine science fiction shaping or challenging social conventions, particularly when its core fans seem increasingly ritualistic and intent on celebrating aging giants whose best work is decades behind them. So where does all this leave science fiction? Its fans seem to revel in their geek-outsider status, even as the genre increases in respectability and popular appeal to the detriment of its

potential as a venue for edgy social commentary.

In its moving-picture incarnation, sci-fi has fully penetrated culture as part of big-business entertainment and movies like *Terminator 3* and *Matrix 2* show just how mainstream dystopic visions have become. The books are the bread and butter of sci-fi, of course, but they haven't managed to generate a zeitgeist similar to, say, the *Matrix's* take on a Philip-K.-Dick-like world of multiple realities. In terms of contributing trends to the overall culture, sci-fi writing has been quiet since, really, Vancouver's William Gibson brought us into cyberspace in the mid-eighties.

If the weird and dangerous ideas are out there, I couldn't find them amid the earnest, gentle, middle-class fans bustling through the convention in search of their pals. But that doesn't mean I'm prepared to write off sci-fi. The sheer excitement fans have, coupled with their ability to invent community out of a shared enthusiasm for fairy tales set in the future, tells us that this is an enduring medium, a medium with the capacity to surprise us just when we least expect it.

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