

**Westercon 57 (ConKopelli)**  
**A convention report by Evelyn C. Leeper**  
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Westercon 57 (ConKopelli) was held July 2-5, 2004, at The Wigwam Resort in Litchfield Park, Arizona. Attendance was approximately 750, somewhat low for Westercon.

### **Hotel**

The Wigwam Resort's trademark is "Authentic Arizona", but as John Hertz pointed out, wigwams are strictly eastern United States, and even teepees are a bit further north from here.

The Wigwam was the poshest place at which we had ever stayed--or were likely to. The room was huge, probably about 20' by 20', with two queen-sized beds, a couch, a comfortable chair, a coffee table, a desk and chair, and a wardrobe with television, mini-bar, and drawers. Surprisingly, though the closet was large, with about a dozen hangers, there were only three small drawers.

The bathroom was also huge, close to the size of some hotel rooms we have been in. It had two sinks, a tub, \*and\* a shower.

The extras are where you really notice the luxury. The main room has a pitcher and glasses made of glass. (There are a few plastic cups, with the explanation that they are to take to the pool area rather than the glasses.) The ice bucket really works--ice gotten in the evening is still mostly ice in the morning. Even the bathroom cups are pottery mugs! (The public restrooms in the main lodge provide thick cloth hand towels rather than just paper ones.)

Only the coffee maker and iron are no fancier than other places. (The prices for the mini-bar and the bottled water on the counter are high, but at least the coffee is free.)

The television gets only about a dozen basic channels, rather than the extended assortment one gets elsewhere (so no History Channel, Discovery Channel, AMC, TCM, or Sci-Fi Channel). On the other hand, they assume you will be spending times doing resort things like swimming, playing tennis, or golfing.

The thermostat was great--you could set the desired temperature easily. The air conditioning was quiet. You could hear it if you listened, but it did not have the usual noisy turning-on and turning-off. There were also enough outlets, though no empty ones located right next to the bed.

There was a balcony overlooking the small pool near our building. Unfortunately, the door automatically locks behind you and the room key doesn't open it. They do warn you, though, and you can open the deadbolt while it's ajar to keep it from shutting completely. The rooms are in small two-story building scattered around the site, so there was a small swimming pool that our balcony overlooked as well as a larger pool by the main lodge. An extra bonus was that we could watch the Litchfield Park fireworks (which were two blocks away) from our balcony, since it just happened to face in the right direction.

Because the resort is so spread out, there are little golf carts to take you (and your luggage) back and forth. We used them to get us and our luggage out to our room (650 steps, or about a third of a mile from the main lodge) when we first arrived, and then to get our luggage back to the car at the end, but generally just walked.

My one complaint is that the railings on the stairs to the second floor, and many of the door handles, are metal. They are okay in the shade, but not in the July Arizona sun.

Because of the heat, Mark nicknamed this "ArrakisCon" the first day. Alternately, he suggested "Brightside Crossing." He also suggested a TV spot: "This is your brain." "This is your brain at ConKopelli."

Probably because the resort was so spread out, I clocked myself on my pedometer at four miles Friday, five miles Saturday, three miles Sunday, and three miles Monday.

### **Pre-Con**

I had my problems with registering and such. An email I sent last year asking about hotel reservations was never answered. Neither was one asking about volunteering for programming. After asking on a mailing list, I eventually got some responses from people who wanted to help but were not actually the programming people. Finally, I got the address of the page to sign up on, which involved doing a multi-page questionnaire. Back when things were on paper, one could do this a bit at a time. On-line, it's a bit unwieldy, as one never knows how long it is or how much time to budget for it. I'm not saying they shouldn't do it on-line--there are many advantages--but an indication at the beginning--e.g., "Please fill in the following multi-page questionnaire. It should take you about ten minutes."--would help people know what to expect.

Anyway, Mark and I both volunteered, and then left New Jersey two weeks before the convention not knowing quite what we would be picked for (though Mark did know he was doing origami workshops). Again, two weeks is a fair ways before a regional convention and I'm not saying they should have had schedules by then. But because we were making this part of a driving vacation, we were out of the loop for the last couple of emailings.

We did see the email the day before the convention (at my mother-in-law's place) and got our schedules then, though mine still didn't have room numbers.

## **Registration**

We went to registration and were sent to Programming. This was about six hundred feet away from the main lodge--in the heat. (It hit about 105 degrees Fahrenheit every day.) There we got program books, our schedules, and a free hard-back. What we didn't get that regular registrants got, it turned out, was the local area map and restaurant guide, some of the other flyers, and the purple plastic Sci-Fi Channel bag to carry them in. Note to conventions: if program participants are supposed to pick up their materials somewhere other than registration, make sure all the materials are there. (I would think that stuffing all the bags and then taking some over to Programming would be the easiest in any case.)

I discovered I had been put on "Airbrush 101", which I asked to be removed from, as I do not even know enough about it to ask questions. Although the newsletters contained a few changes to the program as printed, that one never showed up there, and from what I could tell, a lot of others didn't either.

The badges were done with black print--on a dark blue background! Add to this a hard-to-read font, and it meant that one could not just glance at a person's badge and know who they were. Considering how many times people have discussed at \*great\* length that badges should be easily readable, and how to accomplish this, I am somewhat surprised that a major convention can still manage to get it wrong.

## **Green Room/Con Suite**

Given that the Green Room was in a separate building several hundred feet away, I suspect few panelists made it to the Green Room before their panels. Therefore, the fact that the Green Room had no clock was slightly less important. The Con Suite was even further away and harder to find, though by late Saturday there were signs put up to help you. Both had lots of beverages, including "sport beverages"--definitely a necessity for this convention in a way it wouldn't be for, say, Boskone. Unfortunately, both also had televisions running science fiction TV shows and movies on DVD. The result was that the television inhibited conversation and the conversations disturbed people watching television. If a con wants to do this sort of thing, a two-room con suite, with the television in one, would allow for more conversation and socialization.

## **Programming**

There were (in my opinion) way too many items (156, not counting readings and such, with up to eleven simultaneous items) for the number of attendees. And while some conventions are trying to de-emphasize "tracks", ConKopelli labeled each item with the track and number, though they did have cross-track items labeled (for example) "FAN 30/SCI 22". Panels were given ninety-minute slots, though panelists were not told if they were expected to fill fifty minutes, sixty minutes, seventy-five minutes, or what. (Some seemed to think they were supposed to fill all ninety minutes. This is just flat-out wrong. People need time to get from one room to another, go the bathroom, etc. There is no excuse for keeping a panel going until the next panel has to come in and kick you out, especially with ninety-minute slots.)

Panelists were given one name card at their first panel and expected to keep it for all their others. These probably should have been given out with the registration materials.

The one major change to the program that was announced in the newsletters and on signs was that C. J. Cherryh, the Guest of Honor, had taken sick and could not attend. This seems to be becoming distressingly common, although previous conventions I've attended seem to have Guests of Honor who fall and injure themselves rather than get sick. Obviously this was out of the control of the committee. But this, combined with the lack of the Locus Awards, led to a very small banquet. (One figure I heard was 29 people!)

The Locus Awards have been a fixture at Westercons, but apparently this year the convention committee could not come to an agreement with Locus over the arrangements, so the awards will be given out at Noreascon 4.

The map provided with the grid was a black-and-white copy from what must have been a color map, so many of the rooms had their names in black printed over the dark gray of the room, making it very hard to read.

Oh, and the sheet containing pages 17, 18, 47, and 48 was bound (stapled) in the program book upside down.

### **Why Volunteer at a Convention?**

**FAN 29**

**Friday 4:00 PM**

**Janice Gelb, Evelyn C. Leeper, Kevin Standlee**

Description: "What makes a fan-run convention different from a company-run convention? Is there any reason to care or get involved in your local conventions?"

Attendance: 3 people (all of whom were well-known convention volunteers)

Gelb described her first experience "volunteering." She was at Iguacon and because of the heat (Phoenix in August 1978) was wearing a sundress. Someone she knew (whose name luckily for him escapes me) came up to her and said, "You're volunteering to work in the art show, and be sure to bend over a lot." (This is particularly ironic, because Iguacon was a convention that went out of its way to do "women's-lib" stuff because Harlan Ellison agreed to be the Guest of Honor before he realized that Arizona hadn't ratified the Equal Rights Amendment. When he did, he decided to live in a trailer rather than put money in Arizona's economy by paying for a hotel room, etc., and also encouraged the committee to emphasize women's rights and such in the programming.

Anyway, after fifteen minutes this panel was declared dead, and Janice and I went to Albertson's to pick up a few groceries. The hotel restaurants are very pricey, there isn't much near enough to walk to, and Janice wasn't quite sure what she would do for Shabbos, so she got some food for then and I got some food for us since we had finished most of our snack stuff.

When we got back, we pulled into a parking space and as we were getting out, Mark came up. He had been looking for the car (to get something) and when he couldn't find it was convinced that because of the resort's layout he had somehow ended up in the wrong lot. Luckily he saw us pull in just as he had given up and was walking back to the lodge.

**CSI: Science Fiction in Disguise**

**MEDIA 22 / FAN 26 / SCI 11**

**Friday 5:30 PM**

## James Hay, David Silver

Description: "Does CSI represent what really happens in a CSI unit or is it science fiction?"

Attendance: 22 people

Silver is a retired lawyer. Hay was studying for a masters degree in forensic science.

Hay began by saying, "Is it science fiction? Yes, at best. A lot of it is future forensics." Future, because a lot of what you see is too fast, too good, too computerized, and too easy. As he summed it up, "They wish." In real life, for example, autopsies take seven to ten days.

Silver said that he was "delighted with the science" in the CSI tools in the same way that he was with the science in Heinlein's work of rolling roads, rockets, nipples for drinking in space suits, etc. In CSI they create new tests or use the old tests new ways, and they have neat toys and exotic locations. I found myself thinking that it sounds a lot like James Bond, and also that they have outre crimes.

Silver also said that CSI was science fiction because no one ever calls for a lawyer. (This is not exactly true, but it is most of the time.)

Hays said that CSI follows the great science fiction tradition of scientists doing things amazingly fast.

Hays and Silver both discussed the O.J. trial as a fiasco of all this science.

Silver said that regarding whether CSI is science fiction, "I can argue that it's not . . . ." to which Hays responded, "You're a lawyer; you're supposed to be able to argue."

Someone in the audience felt that CSI was not necessarily science fiction just because all the results were achieved so quickly, citing an old cinematic tradition: "All they're doing is compressing time." But Hays disagreed, pointing out that (for example) in the show the fingerprint-matching pops up a single match at the end. In real life, however, the print-matching is done manually, and one gets the number of points that match each possibility, not a binary "match" or "no match". In addition, in real life faxing the fingerprints would add breaks to the image, which are precisely the elements that would be looked at for matching, so when the CSI crew is working from a fax, they have almost no chance of finding the right answer.

I would add that the CSI crew always finds the one tiny piece of evidence they need. A recent article said that this was a bit of a concern with public prosecutors, because in real life this does not happen, and they fear that juries will come to expect it, and be far less willing to convict with that single drop of blood, or fingernail bit, or chemical trace.

Hays did note that they can now duplicate DNA so that only a small sample is needed. (To do this, by the way, they use enzymes discovered in geothermal vents in Yellowstone.)

Silver said that even if one contended that CSI is not science fiction, it is at least science-fictional, or as Hays said, "science-fictionoid".

In terms of factual errors, Hays pointed out that CSIs do not arrest suspects. However, they may wear guns (a point that many people do question). Silver said that the prosecutor wants to convince the jury that the CSI giving evidence is impartial, but just the very fact of the CSI's employment by the police department makes this questionable, let alone allowing the CSI to have a conversation with the suspect.

Hays also pointed out that the CSIs on the show also seem to be generalists, or at least to have multiple areas of expertise. In a city the size of Las Vegas (or Miami), there would be no generalists, although in small towns with only one CSI, this might not be true.

Hays felt that when the show started, the crime scene "stuff" was better good, but has gotten worse as time went on, particularly in terms of how the CSIs move around in a way that might destroy a lot of evidence. (This is even more evident in *I, ROBOT*, where Will Smith picks up a chair and smashes a window at a crime scene to demonstrate something or other!) Hays does like the cuts ("time squeezes") which demonstrate the tedium of searching an entire carpet for threads or whatever. He feels that archaeologists would make good CSIs for this reason. (Actually, they sort of are. They attempt to reconstruct the past from the remaining physical evidence they can find.)

Another problem with CSI is that they actually have a small amount of evidence to process (but again, always exactly the \*right\* evidence). As Hays said, "Murder in a crack den--you run out of numbers" (for labeling the evidence).

An audience member noted that in addition to be science fiction, CSI (at least in Las Vegas) is film noir. Another pointed out that it meets Damon Knight's definition, in that the crimes are often built around scientific facts (e.g., a short in a telephone could start a fire).

Talking about all the spin-offs and copies of CSI, Hays said, "I'm waiting for the Forensics Channel!" Someone in the audience mentioned that there is even a show called "Peacemakers", which is CSI in the Old West. Someone suggested that late at night they could carry infomercials for all the new, cool forensics gadgets.

Hays said there have been science fiction forensic stories before, mentioning Isaac Asimov's mysteries and Randall Garrett's Lord Darcy stories. But my recollection of Asimov's mysteries is that few if any of them involve gathering evidence (they're more psychological and logical analysis). And while the Lord Darcy stories are indeed forensic, the forensics are magical (e.g., there is some sort of gravitational attraction between a bullet and the gun that fired it).

Regarding the criticisms of the accuracy of CSI, one audience member said, "Whatever your specialty is, they always do it wrong on television." Silver said that this is true in novels as well: "Grisham doesn't write very well." He did recommend a literary CSI series by Robert Crais with Elvis Cole and his partner Joe Pike.

Hays summed up by saying, "They actually made being a nerd hot and I love them for that!"

**Magic Realism: The History, The Literature, The Film**  
**ART 112**  
**Saturday 10:00 AM**  
**Bruce Taylor**

Description: "Magic Realism--what it is, examples of it as literature and film, the history of it and why so much attention is being paid to it."

Attendance: 8 people

This was obviously a lecture rather than a panel. Because of this, I was surprised at the lack of breadth of Taylor's approach. He is the publisher of the magic realist magazine "Margin", but does not seem to have researched the field very thoroughly. Also, he seemed to have a lot of New Age interpretations attached to magic realism, and he spent way too much time on politics.

As an example of lack of research, he claimed that the term "magic realism" was coined in 1943 by Alejo Carpentier (a Cuban writer influenced by surrealists). This completely overlooks its previous usage by German art critic Franz Roh in the 1920s and Venezuelan literary critic Uslar Pietri after that. It was popularized by Miguel Asturias after he applied it to his own Nobel-prize-winning work.

(The on-line Britannica does claim in one article Carpentier "initiated the use of magic realism in his [1958] story collection 'Guerra del tiempo'", but in another merely says that Carpentier was "among the first practitioners of the style known as 'magic realism'".)

Taylor never defined "magic realism, and the only definition given was Mark's one of "fiction with a wisp of fantasy running through it." Later, Taylor characterized magic realism as, "The normal is strange. How is it that the strange becomes normal?"

Taylor felt that magic realism developed in South America because, he said, South America was completely alien to Europe but the European culture ended up superimposed on it. Through magic realism, people say we need to accept both on a level playing field. And because Spanish-American culture is making inroads into our (United States) culture, we are ripe for magic realism.

However, he added, the subconscious is marginalized in our culture. "Franz Kafka became the symbol of magic realism" in South America, Taylor said, but there has been a denial of "all this" in North America (by which I assume he means the United States and Canada, but not Mexico).

Someone asked about the relationship between surrealism and magic realism. Taylor said that in magic realism, reality is very strange, while surrealism says that there is a difference between reality and the weird and makes a conscious attempt to be weird.

Taylor felt that the novel and movie "Like Water for Chocolate" was "probably the best introduction to magic realism that this culture ever had." He said that when marketing says a movie is "visually stylized," they mean magic realism even though the two are not the same. In general, he added, films have done more than literature to introduce magic realism to our culture. In this category he listed "Chocolat", "What Dreams May Come", "Pleasantville", "Big Fish", "Being John Malkovich", "The Truman Show", and "O Brother Where Art Thou?" (An audience member thought some of Terry Gilliam's films might qualify, but those seem to be to be out-and-out fantasy, as is "Pleasantville".) I would add "The Last Wave". Taylor also suggested that a lot of "The Twilight Zone" was really magic realism, especially (he said) "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge". (Of course, that was the one episode that was not really a "Twilight Zone" episode, but was a French short just shown on the series. Taylor did not know this either.)

Taylor also claimed that dreams are magic realist--I am not sure what that means. He did seem at times a bit paranoid of what he called "the rationalist culture."

An audience member suggested that one thing that makes something horror rather than fantasy or magic realism is that horror induces a feeling in the reader in the real world.

Someone suggested that perhaps some of Orson Scott Card's works (in which folk magic works) could be considered magic realism. Other people suggested the works of Tim Powers, Ursula K. LeGuin, and Lucius Shepard. (Charles Brown suggested at another convention that if Lucius Shepard would change his name to some Hispanic, he would be hailed as a great author of magic realism by the literary establishment.)

In terms of a good literary introduction to magic realism, Taylor recommended Barbara Howes's anthology "Eyes of the Heart". In terms of cross-over into magazines in the science fiction field, "Realms of Fantasy", "Tailbones, and "The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction" are the main markets (or sources), but there are also "Argosy", "On Spec", "Interzone", and "The Third

Alternative", as well as anthologies and collections. Taylor noted that authors of magic realism are in the SFWA, but it is "too difficult to call it the SFMRWA." He also said that it is because science fiction writers want to discriminate against magic realism writers because magic realism does not sell.

There had been a line of magic realism books out from Avon Bard (which included the Howes), but it ended in 1986.

Someone suggested that magic realism is the literary expression of cultural relativism. Taylor agreed, saying it can also be very political. Someone else thought that one might consider the works of Erich Von Daniken and a movie called "What the #\$\*! Do We Know?" as "non-fiction magic realism", but this idea did not seem to garner a lot of agreement.

("What the #\$\*! Do We Know?" is a documentary with interviews with "scientists and mystics" and purports to show how "the distinction between science and religion becomes increasingly blurred, as we realize that, in essence, both science and religion are describing the same phenomena!")

For some reason I did not note down, Taylor talked about how the formation of crystal structures is affected by the emotions of people nearby. Yeah, right. He and members of the audience also got side-tracked into a discussion of animal intelligence (which would certainly make an interesting science panel at a convention).

Taylor also talked about all sorts of coincidences (synchronicity) when he started the magazine "Margin", apparently thinking that they were very meaningful and important.

Taylor summed up a lot of this by saying, "Everything we think of as normal is extremely strange." He sees magic realism as "a bridge between classic literature and genre."

This was an example of a "panel" that went for the full ninety minutes when it should have ended after an hour. A lot was filled out with discussions that had nothing to do with magic realism, or Taylor describing the plots of some of his stories. It's hard enough for a panel to go for eighty or ninety minutes--for one person to do it is near impossible unless he or she is particularly well-prepared and experienced as a speaker.

**FAHRENHEIT 451**  
**LIT 402**  
**Saturday 2:00 PM**  
**John Hertz**

Description: "Discussion of Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury"

Attendance: 14 people

This was part of a series of discussions of classic books (mostly those nominated for Retro Hugos this year).

Hertz began by pointing out that Ray Bradbury says that this is his only \*science fiction\* novel, and that may well be true. It takes place in the future and depends on the operation of technology, so it is science fiction, and no one could think of any other Bradbury novels that would be science fiction. (Admittedly, Bradbury's forte is short fiction rather than novels.) And in fact Hertz thought that another nominee, Theodore Sturgeon's "More Than Human" is actually less like science fiction than this is.



Hertz quoted Nabokov who called "Fahrenheit 451" "a book everyone talks about and no one has read." This is close to true--several people at the discussion based their comments on the movie rather than the book. There are several major differences. For example, in the novel, Montag has already hidden several books before the start of the story. Hertz felt that one flaw in the book was the cardboard characterization of Mildred, which is somewhat better in the movie.

Hertz conceded, however, "One of the weaknesses of science fiction is that it is a very tempting disguise for a sermon." (Gregory Benford has said in part this is because sermons would not sell, so people do not write sermons--they write novels.) In fact, Hertz said, of all the nominees (Isaac Asimov's "Caves of Steel", Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451", Arthur C. Clarke's "Childhood's End", Hal Clement's "Mission of Gravity", Theodore Sturgeon's "More Than Human"), only "Mission of Gravity" is not a sermon, so maybe it is the best for that reason. Later, Hertz was explaining that "it is well to do what you're doing and not do what you're not doing"; this was another point in "Mission of Gravity"'s favor.

Now, Bradbury also claims that "Fahrenheit 451" has no political message, but the consensus seemed to be that he was being disingenuous about this.

There was a lot of rather self-congratulatory talk, such as this was among the best literature because it puts the art first, and that "science fiction at its best sows how people respond" to events, to change, to technology.

Hertz also said that Bradbury's "poetry" is in full force even from the first paragraph. He gave examples of Bradbury's use of "seductive false beauty" in the image of the ear-pieces as "seashells."

Mark Leeper thought that in some ways "Fahrenheit 451" was a re-working of Bradbury's earlier short story "The Pedestrian" in that it basically asks the question, "What if the state took away what you loved?" Hertz saw similarities to Richard Wright's "Native Son" in that the state uses meaningless squabbles to occupy people's attention away from the real issues.

Hertz felt that in regard to the book-burning, the Chinese emperor Ch'in Shih Huang Ti in 213 B.C.E. was a better parallel than the more common one of Hitler, because Hitler targeted specific works, authors, or themes, while the emperor burned everything except practical works (such as books on agriculture).

In summarizing his reactions to reading the present and Retro Hugo nominees, Hertz said we seemed to be "imagining more wildly [now] and writing worse."

Regarding the relative shortness of "Fahrenheit 451" by today's standards, Hertz cited a review by Orson Scott Card of a novel of which he said that he wished there were 300 more pages, and that the author did not know how much room there was in the novel. Hertz felt this reflected the current feeling that novels should be as long as possible. I observed that it is better for the reader to want 300 pages more than 300 pages fewer (a paraphrase of Cicero who said that it was better that people ask why there are no statues of him than why there were statues). Hertz said that Japanese had developed a form of poetry with five lines and thirty-one syllables, but then decided it was too long, and came up with haiku, a form with three lines and seventeen syllables.

Returning to the idea of the book as sermon, Mark Leeper said that "Fahrenheit 451", "Brave New World", "1984", and "The Handmaid's Tale" were constantly being used as bogeymen. (I forget if it was here or somewhere else that the question of whether "Brave New World" was actually a dystopia arose.)

**FINDING THE FUTURE: A SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION**  
**Saturday 4:00 PM**

Description: (film)

Attendance: 8 people

This was a documentary shot primarily at Chicon 2000, which was introduced by producer Joe Formichella, who said encouragingly, "It doesn't suck." What we got to see was a very worn-out tape, and I had to leave before it finished, so perhaps I cannot judge it fairly. But there seemed to be an emphasis on showing weird-looking fans (underscored by Robert Silverberg's description of the convention as "six thousand square pegs trying to get into round holes"). Lois McMaster Bujold did talk about science fiction and science fiction fan conventions as being participatory rather than the "I produce/you consume" model seen at other conventions. Catherine Asaro talked about science fiction as a "willingness to imagine differences," and David Brin spoke of "self-preventing prophecies" (e.g., "1984" and "On the Beach"). The film also had a filk soundtrack. But I found myself asking just who the audience was for this? The History Channel? (The Program Book says it is being released this summer, but gives no indication of how or where.)

**Masquerade**  
**Saturday 7:00 PM**  
**panelists**

The masquerade was scheduled to start at 7 PM, but they did not even open the doors until 7:15 PM, and did not start until 7:37 PM. The masquerade had seventeen entries. This sounded small to me, and then Master of Ceremonies Cary Riall announced this was the smallest ever Westercon masquerade.

Even seventeen was an exaggeration. The first entry was "The Unicorn", but nothing came out, and Riall read the text explaining that there was none, because "there are no virgins at this convention."

Other entries included Fog from "The Fifth Element" (Mark said he should have been wearing little cat feet), The Ultimate Male Fantasy ("inspired by, well, drinking and dancing"), and Torvald of Gor.

The masquerade ended at 8:05 PM, making the whole thing less than a half-hour long.

**Star-Gazing**  
**Saturday 8:00 PM**

The local amateur astronomy group set up several telescopes on the resort's golf course, and the clear skies and relative isolation (several miles west of Phoenix and on the edge of the developed area) made the viewing quite good. We got to see Jupiter and its four largest moons, the Sombrero Galaxy (how appropriate for this area!), an open cluster, Antares, and a variety of other sights which I could not note down because it was dark. (At one point, someone turned on a flashlight and promptly got yelled at.) One thing which we could see without a telescope was an Iridium flare. This is caused when one of the Iridium network of satellites passes over with its solar panels angled at just the right angle to catch the sun and reflect it to where you are. They cannot be seen every night, and the astronomy group jokes that it took a lot of work to arrange one, but actually we were just lucky.

**Parties**  
**Saturday 9:00 PM**

After the star-gazing, I went to a few parties. The best was the Japanese, where I talked for a while to one of the committee about how I thought that the biggest obstacle to people voting for Japan was the incorrect perception of how expensive costs \*in\* Japan.

**Fanzine Lounge**  
**Sun 10:00 AM**

I took a two-hour shift in the Fanzine Lounge Sunday morning. No one showed up. It was quite a bit out of the way and hard to find. Also, whatever possessed the hotel to schedule a wedding in the room opposite the fanzine lounge Saturday night and a church service Sunday?! (The church service did finish by a little after 10AM.)

Apparently it is hard to get fans to staff the fanzine lounge Sunday morning, because John Hertz seemed pleased when I offered to take the same shift at Noreascon 4.

**What Is a Myth?**  
**MYTH 18 / LIT 29**  
**Sunday 1:00 PM**

**Jane Lindskold (mod), Brenda Cooper, Brian Gross, Dawn Mullan, Robert Reginald, Michael Underwood**

Description: (no description given)

Attendance: 12 people

Lindskold began with the question that occurred to me--shouldn't this panel have been held on the first day of the convention?

Gross suggested that myth has to have something to do with good versus evil. Mullen said myths were stories people tell to explain the natural and the supernatural worlds, to define proper behavior, and so on. Underwood felt that myths are stories associated with a particular group because they are "stories that explain who we are." And Cooper thought they were "stories that speak so deeply as to who we are that they transcend time."

Reginald said that traditionally, the term "myth" has been defined as "somebody else's religious beliefs," but that most people are trying to get away from that. Gross agreed, saying that in spite of common usage, people trying to use it in an accurate sense should try "not to use the word to mean something that is false." He felt that one of the requirements for a myth is what the story is used for. There is a continuum containing fables, parables, legends, and myths.

Lindskold said it was not only "somebody else's religious beliefs," but "other people's religions that they're not using any more." The problem with this was that before the United States or England had a noticeable Hindu population, one used to see books on "Hindu myths." Now because of this new diversity, the term is undergoing transformation. (This is similar to a book called in its first edition "How Judaism Differed" but later renamed to "How Judaism Differs".) Of course, one does still hear

the term "Christian mythology", but the people using it almost always have an agenda of denigrating that belief system.

Underwood said that if you are in a Christian society, then other religions are by definition false. Therefore, \*any\* other religious beliefs are false, and this is how the connection between myths as other people's religious beliefs and falsity arose.

Cooper thought that the idea that "myth is a lie" came out of science and its explanation of the world. But Gross said that science is not a system of beliefs; it is a process. (One could say, I suppose, is that it includes a belief that this process is useful.)

Underwood saw myth as a metaphor, and that it was symbolic and imaginistic.

Mullan listed a set of characteristics put forth by Joseph Campbell as defining what is a myth: it awakens wonder, it teaches us proper conduct, it fills a niche, etc. (I really wish I knew shorthand!)

Lindskold thought that we might end up building a myth pantheon or system across cultures in the 21st century. She thought some of the recurring motifs of myths included a journey, a descent to the underworld, a meeting with a teacher, an initiation, and the resurrected god ("the vegetative god"). This list, she said, was also derived from Campbell, and is becoming very common in popular media. However, myth has to have a religious or spiritual content. This was in response to my question about fairy tales and legends, but she added that some fairy tales are "degraded myths", by which she meant "eroded" rather than "serving some base purpose".) Reginald agreed, saying that there is indeed a difference between Aesop's fables and Greek myths. Someone in the audience said that fairy tales are object lessons rather than attempts to interpret the world. Cooper said that myths are embraced by a larger set of people than fairy tales.

Later, Lindskold re-iterated that there is a difference between "the hero's journey" and myth in Campbell's writing.

Does a myth have to be believed (or have been believed)? Someone in the audience suggested that a myth can have a metaphorical religious or spiritual truth without literal belief. Reginald said that religions, particularly state religions, are often orthopractic rather than orthodox. Lindskold pointed out that Socrates's crime was not to deny the gods, but rather to try to eliminate the stories of gods arguing, fornicating, etc., and instead to concentrate on the divine. Gross said that while there are Greek myths about the gods, there are also stories about the gods that are just stories (but gave no examples).

Lindskold saw one major difference between myths and fairy tales (and other stories) as the "span of the question it's trying to answer." Myths attempt to answer such questions as, "Where does evil come from? Where does death come from? Do we die forever?"

Then Gross gave "The Seven Deadly Sins" as a myth, and Lindskold gave "Pilgrim's Progress", which left me thinking that I \*still\* did not understand what a myth was (unless they were giving these examples of cautionary tales that are not myths, but I did not get that impression).

Lindskold said that myth also evolves with cultural contact. This may be most evident in the Greek and Roman myths (Theseus is an agglutination of several hero figures), but Lindskold said that Native American myth systems have adaptation within them as well. She gave the example of the origin of the races as described by Native Americans, which had to have been formulated after contact with the other races was established. "Myth is not static," she observed. Gross said that the Greek-Roman connections are similar to the Norse-Teutonic ones.

Mullan identified seven "universal" types of myths: creation, hero quest, heroine quest, flood (or ice,

fire, earthquakes, or whatever natural disaster is common to the area), seasons, rebirth, and astronomical.

Harking back to Lindsfold's comments about new myths for the 21st century, Cooper suggested that "Manifest Destiny" was a contemporary myth. Other people named "Free Enterprise" and "Democracy". I am not sure these fit any of the definitions of myths given here. But Lindsfold also said, "The computer has become the modern trickster deity." There was also some discussion of urban legends.

**Raising Pagan Children**  
**FAN 34**  
**Sunday 2:30 PM**  
**Chris Dickenson, Brian Gross, Dawn Taylor**

Description: "Discussion of the challenges of raising pagan children in a Christian world"

Attendance: 15 people

Dickenson said she was raised Church of England, which she described as "Catholic Lite, one-third less guilt." She became a pagan after her divorce, when her daughter was nine years old, and calls herself an "Episcopagan". Gross was neither pagan nor a parent, but has taught church classes; he describes himself as a "recovering Catholic" who is currently a Unitarian. Taylor has been a practicing pagan since she was fourteen, though she did not realize it until she was thirty.

This was all valid background for the panel topic, but then the panel decided to poll the audience for their backgrounds. One said she "came from a Judeo-Christian background." I doubt it. \*I\* come from a Judeo-Christian background: my mother is Jewish and my father is Christian. I suspect the audience member was just trying to be politically correct.

Another said she was an agnostic pagan. One was in a coven with other fans, and said when she is asked, "What do witches do at coven meetings?" she responded, "We light candles, we chant, and we watch 'Enterprise.'"

By this point, several people had taken the opportunity to dump on the rudeness of bigotry of Christians they had known and this, combined with the amount of time I have calculated this "audience sharing" would take, convinced me that I was unlikely to hear any good discussion on the challenges of raising a child in a "minority" religion. That was what I had hoped for, rather than the pagan support group that this seemed to have turned into, so I left.

**Alternative Myths Used in Science Fiction and Fantasy**  
**MYTH 1 / LIT 1**  
**Sunday 4:00 PM**  
**Lee Gold (mod), Vera Nazarian, Kevin Radthorne, Annette Sexton-Uriz**

Description: "Panelists address the challenges and advantages to developing cultures and religious systems in Fantasy realms based on other cultures besides the European/English/Irish backdrops found dominating the genre. I reference the application of myth and religious hierarchies from Asia, Egypt, Russia, and even 20th Century America."

Attendance: 8 people

The panelists talked about the various mythologies they had used in their works. Sometimes they got them from their own backgrounds, but sometimes they used mythologies they had studied or otherwise found interesting.

Gold talked about using an anthropological background, saying that because Ursula K. LeGuin was exposed to anthropology through her parents, she was "able to create in her works cultures almost as strange as those on earth."

Underwood said that because mythologies are symbols, signs, and motifs, mixing and matching them can work. He also felt that there is a distinction between personal and social mythologies, but did not explain what he meant by that. The pitfall, he warned, was to draw too closely on a mythology that is too recognizable.

Nazarian said that if you are constructing a mythology for a science fiction or fantasy novel, you should look at the world's forces first, and then structure your mythology based on that. She also said that one needs to create new gods and goddesses, such as the god of things leftover, or the goddess and the ocean. (Neil Gaiman does this very well, I think.)

Sexton-Uriz said that as an artist, she does take elements from various myth families in creating pieces of art. (But art is different from a story.)

Gold said, "What about non-humans?" Radthorne said that human readers have to be able to relate to aliens, so there has to be some similarity. Nazarian said that in her novel, she created beings who had no ability to see color, and this creates a different sort of mythology. Gold said that culture shapes how you see things, so for other (alien) cultures, red might not be an alarm color (for example). (I am not sure this is a good example--red is an alarm color in large part because fires and other hot objects that could burn you are red, and this is unlikely to be very different elsewhere.)

There was a brief digression into mid-winter holidays. In the Soviet Union, Father Winter and New Years Day were the big holiday myths, and Sexton-Uriz said that Three Kings Day used to be the major holiday in Mexico, but that it has been supplanted recently by Christmas. Even now, children get clothes for Christmas, but toys for Three Kings Day. The Day of the Dead is also being replaced by Halloween, just as in England Guy Fawkes Day is giving way to Halloween.

A long discussion of calendars followed, including some hand-waving about how star dates in "Star Trek" seem inconsistent but it is only because of relativity. According to Gold, the JPL Mars team took to wearing watches custom-built to show Mars time on them. Someone pointed out that since the natural biological clock is twenty-five hours, the change-over would not be that difficult.

Someone asked if aliens would have different Jungian archetypes. Somehow this led to Gold observing that incest in human societies is taboo unless you are high enough (either gods, or rulers who are considered effectively gods). (One could actually postulate a biology that makes incest desirable; I wonder if any author has. Stephen Baxter's "Coalescent" edges toward this, but does not go that far.)

Underwood said that in "Star Wars" we have the myth of man versus machine, and that Church of England people used to say that the Force was just the Holy Spirit (at least until the latest two movies came out). Someone observed that some technology appears magical--rabbit ears on televisions not only appear magical, but the human is actually part of the system (i.e., if you are holding the rabbit ears, you get a better result than if you are not).

Gold said that at some point we will have to confront the question of whether robots, artificial intelligences, and so on, have souls. For that matter, we will have to deal with that question regarding animals and aliens as well. (Someone mentioned the robot religion in Isaac Asimov's "I,

Robot".)

Someone asked how, in a multiple universe model, souls decide which universe to occupy.

**CONJURE WIFE  
LIT 406  
Sunday 6:00 PM  
Elizabeth Burnham**

Description: "Discussion of Conjure Wife by Fritz Leiber"

Attendance: 3 people

Because we were the only two people other than the moderator to show up, this did not quite come off. At a convention where most events seemed under-attended, this was at the low end of that.

**Future of the SciFi Channel  
MEDIA 31  
Monday 11:30 AM  
James Hay, Tammy Tripp, Lee Whiteside**

Description: "Are we not TV? We are SciFi--The De-Evolution of the SciFi Channel--The SciFi Channel has constantly evolved since its beginning in the early 1990s. But is it always for the better? We look at the channel's past history and speculate on its future now that it's owned by NBC."

Attendance: 15 people

I should have realized from the description that this would be speculation by fans rather than information from the channel itself. But even more than that, it seemed to be a retrospective as much as a prediction.

The SciFi Channel has had a checkered past. It was first connected with the USA network, then Universal, and now NBC. Originally it was mostly re-runs, but there were good original shows such as "SciFi Buzz" and "FTL Newsfeed". As Tripp said, it used to be for fans. But then they got away from that with John Edwards ("Crossing Over"), "Scare Tactics", and other such shows. More recently, they had "Exposure", a series featuring science fiction short films, but that is also gone. Whiteside said that they have managed to get a 1% rating (not bad for a cable channel) and now feel that they must maintain that.

Hay gave more details. First, as was said, the SciFi Channel was re-runs of really old science fiction. Then they switched to a whole run of "dead series", more recent science fiction series that had not done very well when they were on. Next came their first reality phase ("bloody UFOs, weird facts"). After this, they went into a period of picking up new series dropped by other networks (e.g., "Sliders", "Stargate SG-1", "The New Outer Limits"). The problem was that they kept canceling good series such as "Farscape", "The Invisible Man", "Lexx", "The Black Scorpion", "The Secret Adventures of Jules Verne", and "The Chronicle". (I have seen "Lexx" and would not characterize it as "good"; the same goes for "The Secret Adventures of Jules Verne".)

Whiteside said that at some point they started promoting "SciFi Saturday", an evening of original series. (The name seemed awfully redundant to me--wasn't the whole week supposed to be SciFi?)

But that bombed, because Saturday night is a terrible night for original series (in terms of what the target audience wants to watch on Saturday night). It is fine for "popcorn movies", however, so that is what they are showing now. (These are mostly of the "Vicious Reptile of the Week" variety ("Anaconda", "Boa", "Gator", etc.). Now they are going to try showing an evening of original series on Thursday, of "Andromeda", "Stargate SG-1", and "Stargate Atlantis". (Someone said they had a try at "SciFriday" before they did "SciFi Saturday".)

In answer to an audience question, Hays said that the SciFi Channel never picked up any of the "Star Trek" series because they are far too expensive.

Another approach the SciFi Channel is taking is to run new shows in the summer when other networks are showing only reruns.

And yet another trend is toward the mini-series. "Dune" was the first. ("The Stand", though it runs frequently on the SciFi Channel, was not originally telecast there.) This was followed by "Children of Dune", "Firestarter Rekindled", and "Taken". "Riverworld" was not a mini-series per se, but a "back-door pilot" for a show which Hays feared would end up as "let's go to a different world each week", an idea that "has been done to death." (Well, that is a good series for an idea that has been done to death.) The latest mini-series was "Five Days to Midnight", which was not as successful, apparently because it "aired weirdly" (whatever that means).

Hays said of this trend, "Thank God for arc TV," and an audience member added, "Thank you, JMS."

Whiteside said that the real problem is that the highest ratings are for schlock movies. This is probably because they are the easiest to pick up in the middle if you are surfing channels, and with Nielsen ratings now read directly from a box, this shows up.

Whiteside said that currently Friday nights are repeats of "Andromeda", "Stargate SG-1", and "Stargate Atlantis". (I am not sure how this squares with his earlier comments on Thursday nights.) He also said that the "Battlestar Galactica" mini-series has spawned a series due to start in January. Also there is a "Farscape" mini-series due in October which was funded with outside money. In December there will be Ursula K. LeGuin's "Earthsea", a two-hour pilot for "Anonymous Rex", and a series titled "Dead Lawyers", about lawyers who have been brought back to atone for their sins by doing pro bono work. (Is the last a reality show? :-)

There may also be mini-series of Kim Stanley Robinson's "Mars" series, Larry Niven's "Ringworld", and Roger Zelazny's "Amber" series.

Other up-coming shows and movies include "Slipstream" (where someone can time-travel backwards in time--ten minutes), "Species 3", "Tremors 4", "The Man with the Screaming Brain" and "Alien Apocalypse" (both with Bruce Campbell, "Wasteland" (\*not\* based on T. S. Eliot), "Cerberus", "Caved In", and a bunch of Stan Lee stuff.

Whiteside said that "Doctor Who" might end up on the SciFi Channel, in part because while it was inexpensive at one time, the BBC has now priced itself out of most markets. (For example, it used to run on the New Jersey public television station, which seemed to have a budget of about \$12.47.)

Someone suggested a possible new "reality" show: "Queer Eye for the Alien Guy". Earlier someone else suggested a reality show in which non-media fans are sent to a media convention. Whiteside thought a show in which one got all the "Star Trek" captains moved into a house together.

A Horror Channel is in the works. Viacom may also try to start their own science fiction channel and might move "Star Trek" to it from Spike TV.



Someone mentioned something called the Most Extreme Network, featuring such shows as "The Human Carwash" and "Human Pachinko". I do not know if they were referring to Spike TV's "Most Extreme Elimination Challenge" or to what they saw as the logical extension of this.)

The next big thing, though, is USA Network's "The 4400" (about returned abductees).

**THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS**  
**LIT 407**  
**Monday 2:00 PM**  
**Laurraine Tutihasi**

Description: "Discussion of Three Hearts and Three Lions by Poul Anderson"

Attendance: 6

The discussion for this was nowhere near as lively as that of "Fahrenheit 451". I noted that if the action takes place during the time of the Crusades, then the appearance of tobacco is an anachronism. Also, this is part of that great tradition of time travelers who manage to cope amazingly well in an alien time and place. Here, there is at least some hand-waving to give an outright magical explanation for how he speaks the language and so on. (Anderson understood the problem here--one of his other time-travel stories is "The Man Who Came Early", and is about a time traveler who does not cope.)

John Hertz pointed out that "Three Hearts and Three Lions" pre-dated "The Lord of the Rings", and that the latter was the first high fantasy novel presented directly without a framing story of some sort. There, Hertz said, Anderson felt he needed a dream explanation to present his fantasy world. (I am not sure this is entirely accurate. Lord Dunsany and other certainly seemed to write "unexplained" fantasies. On the other hand, maybe Hertz meant in terms of the "general market," and that he considered Dunsany, Lovecraft, and others as having too small and specialized an audience to count.

**Miscellaneous**

The art show was a reasonable size. I was impressed with Grant Fuhst's work, which seemed to have a very European sensibility in it.

**Summary**

It is difficult for me to judge this in the context of other Westercons. The only convention I am familiar enough with to compare it to is Boskone, and that is not fair, because Boskone has a continuing character in the sense that the committee, staff, etc., are largely the same from year to year, while Westercon seems to be more like Worldcon, with a mostly new group of people each year.

There were definitely problems in communication before the convention, and other things I have noted above. The location was less than ideal, though since we used it as a chance to visit Mark's family in Scottsdale, it was good for us. The fact that their Guest of Honor got sick and could not attend, and that the Locus Awards were not at the banquet, pulled the rug out a bit from under the committee as well. But my main complaint would be that there was *\*way\** too much emphasis on

the regional aspect of the convention, with the "mythology" track seeming to somewhat overpower the rest. (And with many of the panels seeming to be only slight variations from each other, the result was that there would be a very low attendance for three panels which, if combined, would have made one good, well-attended panel.) On the other hand, it gave us a chance to sample a convention that we did not go to very often, and see a (mostly) new set of people.

Would we attend another Westercon? Probably, but only in conjunction with a trip to wherever it was being held. If Portland wins for 2007, for example, that would be a possibility for us, that being the one area of the country that we have not traveled in.

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