

# Motley

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number 5, November, 2014

## AFOOT AT LONCON...

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Gregory Benford, Brian Aldiss, Bob Silverberg

### **Contested Ground**

Strolling the streets before Loncon, I saw how the London world works: Autocratic hypercapitalism (Russia, China, some of southeast Asia) without Western checks and balances produces new elites whose dream is then an American or British lifestyle, with education for their children. Having made it big in autocratic countries with corrupt legal systems (if that), a cowed press and rampant corruption, oligarchs and crony capitalists wake up one day and find that they like nothing as much as democratic systems under the rule of law held accountable by an independent press.

They know how their own capricious systems really work, so they buy into the rule of law by acquiring real estate in London, NYC, LA, Paris--driving up prices in prime markets so those with incomes

stagnant or falling get pushed aside, unless they already own. American debt bought by Asian governments, notably the Chinese, gives Asians access to credit-fueled American markets and consumers so Asians lend America money to police the world. Balance depends on American-underwritten stability. They know it, so surface conflict often masks inextricable links. China blusters about their neighbors over worthless islands, but won't tip any scales.

So London streets abound in foreign accents returning money to our economies. Women in saris, business suits and skimpy summer dresses blend with those in full chador—whom I still find creepy. Many long-term Londoners resent the foreign money and rising costs. The virtues of the big-city West are a contested ground, much envied.

John and Judith Clute now find themselves surrounded by a pricey neighborhood, they said, as we were getting into the crowded elevator at the Loncon center. Noting the German manufacturer, I said, "So...this is Schindler's lift?" Everyone laughed, the Germans a little uneasily.

## Pros & Cons

It was a diffuse, crowded worldcon. I avoided the Hugos and found many friends in restaurants doing the same. The tenor of fandom and prodom alike in the last few years has been odd, with many politically correct factions vying, playing Capture the Flag for victimhood status. The worldcon-com's instant decision to dump its already invited Hugo host--in a sort of PC panic, because some thought he might make non-PC jokes--led many to avoid the whole thing--including Neil Gaiman, who got them the invitation.

"What kind of jokes will you use?" I asked one of the co-hosts, Geoff Ryman. "None," he said. Reports say it was dull indeed. At least the closing-ceremony audience singing 'Happy Birthday to You' to Brian Aldiss, who was 89 that day, was a fitting end.

In Loncon's aftermath, the internet journalists piled on. Especially grating was <http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/growing-generation-gap-changing-face-fandom/>

The *Daily Dot* held that

*"Worldcon is like a family reunion," said longtime convention-goer and fanzine writer Curt Phillips, at a panel about the history of Worldcon. After a few days, I could only agree. It was indeed like being at a family reunion, in that it felt like you were spending your time with elderly*

*relatives. You might want to talk to them and listen to their stories, but you'll have to tolerate some offensive and outdated opinions along the way.*

On 8-10 August there had been a Nine Worlds Con—"about gaming, film, cosplay, fandom, literature, science, geek culture, meeting people and having a really big party." An agreeing *Daily Dot* reader said, "A media con, Nine Worlds went out of its way to be as accepting and safe as humanly possible, distributing color-coded lapel clips to indicate your level of comfort when interacting with strangers. A red clip meant "leave me alone." A green clip, and you'd soon be making friends. You could also wear a badge with your preferred gender pronouns, and there were jugs of ice water in all the hallways in case anyone got dehydrated."

A fan, Eric Penner, answered, "To a certain extent, Worldcon's size is a barrier to this kind of inclusivity. A 10,000 person behemoth may not be able to implement gender pronoun badges or a color-coded social interaction system, not just because of the sheer volume of people, but because half of them would dismiss it as politically correct nonsense."

Another fan added, "Yeah, because those badges ARE politically correct nonsense. The system was developed for people with autism. They don't pick up on social cues very well, so it would be of benefit to them."

Another fan differed: "If you were a newcomer attending Worldcon by yourself, or if you were used to the kind of fandom that focuses on things like racebent fanart, slash fanfic, and intelligent pop-culture critique, then you weren't going to have much fun.

A counter view: "They were informed about issues of discrimination in fandom and were capable of having public discussions about racism and rape culture without having to field noisy interruptions from their peers."

Mike Kerpan said in retort: "It sees to me that the whole screed from the *Daily Dot* can be summed up as 'I can't have fun when 'old people' are in the same building as me and enjoying themselves.'"

Another said: "What I suspect is really the problem in this article is not so much a generation gap as a "media gap". Journalism has been consistently been getting more shallow, vulgar, sensationalistic, and celebrity driven. It's clear from reading output from any but the more elite forms of the media that increasingly "journalists" are not well read and sadly, from a less distinguished pool of people who are not all that

bright and not very well educated. The same people who are making the decisions to get rid of book reviews in newspapers and are incapable of understanding any kind of historical reference from before their teen years are the same kind of bozos who would not appreciate a focus on conventions with a literary focus. And aren't the writers and editors of the Daily Dot lucky that they will never grow old?"

Then David Gerrold chimed in: " Mostly, if you look around at the crowds, at the audiences in the room, if you look at all the various gatherings, the masquerades, the gaming rooms, the media rooms — if you look and see who's just sitting around and chatting with who, you'll more often see groups that are age-blind. You don't see that in a lot of other places — but you do see it in fandom, where people of all different ages interact without age being a judgment on ability or insight."

Very sound comments, I thought. Some media fan areas are declining, too. I've even noticed among younger fan friends how the superhero motif has dried up for them. . The dispersal of interest groups affects other cons, too. An sf pro friend sent me this comment after guesting at Dragoncon,

"Just got home from Dragon Con in Atlanta, feeling trampled and a bit dejected. The attendance figure I heard for this megacon was 75,000; it was spread out over four large convention hotels and just about took over the entire downtown area. But if there were more a dozen or so people who'd ever heard of me or my work, they kept themselves hidden. And the ones I met were mainly 50 and older. I'm seriously considering writing space opera for my next novel ... that seems to be the closest to traditional SF that the younger readers want to get. Still, it was an all-expense paid trip, so I can't complain (much)."

### **Hating Lovecraft**

Amid this busy August Daniel José Older launched a petition on Change.org <[www.change.org/the-world-fantasy-award-make-octavia-butler-the-wfa-statue-instead-of-lovecraft](http://www.change.org/the-world-fantasy-award-make-octavia-butler-the-wfa-statue-instead-of-lovecraft)>

As Kevin J. Maroney speaking for himself as editor of NYRSF said, "This is to request that the World Fantasy Award administrators replace the current award statuette, a (haunting, grotesque, lovely) Gahan Wilson bust of H. P. Lovecraft, with a statuette of Octavia Butler. N.K. Jamison says as of today, the petition has just short of 1400 signatures, including mine. I signed it because it identifies a serious problem; I

signed it with reluctance because the proposed solution is not the right one.

Older's petition offers a threefold argument:

First, that Octavia Butler was an exemplary writer "across the imaginative genres from science fiction to historical fantasy to horror."

Second, that Lovecraft was an avowed racist and that his image on the award is deeply discomfoting to recipients, especially those who are among the races that Lovecraft held in particular contempt (i.e., any skin color other than white).

Third, that Lovecraft was a terrible wordsmith."

Kevin concludes:

"I urge the World Fantasy Convention to decide quickly on a replacement that can fairly represent all of fantasy and all of its audience and creators, whether it be a iconic creature such as a dragon or chimera (Mamatas's suggestion); a map (my own preference) or a book; or something more abstract still. HPL's head should be retired as soon as possible, not out of disrespect for Lovecraft as a writer or as a central figure in fantasy, but as a courtesy to generations of writers whom the WFA hopes to honor."

But...as Nick Mamatas put it:

"This is a ridiculous petition for several reasons. The one non-ridiculous reason is that H.P. Lovecraft's racism stains his legacy and upsets many people, as well it should. Granted. With that out of the way, let's discuss the reasons:

1. Octavia Butler was not known as a fantasist, did not write fantasy for the most part, and did not primarily identify as a fantasist. The one big exception is *Kindred*, which she declared a "grim fantasy", even as critics have suggested that it is SF about genetics and evolutionary psychology.

2. She's a well-loved figure though, which means that there's a lot of enthusiasm for the petition *right now*. It also potentially makes a heavy brickbat for anyone who comes out against the petition. A few years ago, some people tried to rally HWA to get the Bram Stoker First Novel category named after Charles Grant...who had little to do with first novels other than having published one himself. (He did cultivate new authors via short stories.) When some objected to the name change, there were all sorts of quivering lips and lamentations that garsh too bad people don't care that Charlie is moldering in the ground, alone and

forgotten sniff sniff... So, you were either in favor of the name change, or in favor of digging Grant up and shitting on his corpse, you meanie. Or, shorter: it is always a bad idea to make a person into a prize, since the prize is then tied to the reputation of the person. (Sometimes prizes are designed to rehabilitate a reputation, a la the Nobel.) With writers, whose works are always up for reappraisal, this is especially fraught. The Lovecraft/World Fantasy issue is an example of that. Is Butler's reputation so fully bulletproof, forever? Don't count on it.

3. The petition also claims that Lovecraft was "a terrible wordsmith." Wrong. Lovecraft was a superior writer. As I put it on Twitter, "he had a pretty clear aesthetic and used polyphony well to build authority for the ineffable."

Noting this, Baron Groznik said...

'It's interesting to see two factions fight over a trophy, and both totally missing the point of HP Lovecraft, the man. The Lovecraftian apologists pooh-pooh Lovecraft's undeniable racism with the "product of his times" or "sheltered childhood" brush-offs, too terrified of speaking to their idol's bald-faced bigotry. The other faction criminalizes him as some such KKK hoodlum with a seething hatred of any non-WASP. But if this debate is truly about busts and honoring writers, let's not forget this trophy isn't for some humanitarian award or the Nobel Peace Prize. It's about writers who have demonstrated exceptional skill in their craft of weird fantasy. In that sense, we're not honoring any saints here. I imagine if we unpacked the psychological closets of most of the WFA winners, it wouldn't be a pretty sight. What I'm picking up here is not so much the latest round of Lovecraft bashing (which is nothing new) as much as deifying Octavia Butler as a more saintly and appropriate choice.'

## **Positions**

Few seem to notice that this petition, promoted by a black woman fantasy writer, wants to put a black woman sf writer in place of Lovecraft. Self-promotion often looks that way: grab an asset developed by others, make it your own.

So be it real estate, crowd attention, or undermining the former great, the con and indeed, fandom, has acquired the air of a *contested ground*. Think of it as a compliment: sf and fandom are important

enough to steal. Some didn't like the feel of Loncon. Silverberg referred to the media emphasis as a "moron fandom" and Mike Resnick remarked to me, "I think you and I should consider ourselves lucky that we were GOHs when these things were still relatively fun and relatively peaceful."

James Cambias remarked, 'Meanwhile the younger, more diverse — and vastly larger — cohort of fans are going to Comic-Cons in New York, San Diego, or Salt Lake City. They're going to DragonCon and PAX and GenCon. Hundreds of thousands of them are going. They enjoy science fiction movies, TV shows, comics, computer games, webcomics, tabletop games, card games, fan fiction, anime, LARPs, and probably some enormous hobbies I don't even know about. They're having fun doing what they enjoy. And what they *don't* enjoy are serious-minded panels about the need for more diversity. Instead of worrying about making SF more diverse, we should focus on making SF more fun again. Bring the fun and the diversity will follow.'

These currents I saw at Loncon: social commentary, inept economics preached by Marxists (!), announcements that some special complaints were somehow privileged. Yet Loncon wasn't really supposed to be about grievances at all. It was about our manifest, burgeoning future. You know, that old one, with technology opening new doors to prospects vast and strange.

That's the sort of future that interests me. I'd like more of it, especially at worldcons.

-Greg

Greg's account reminds me that the majority of attendees were from Europe and reflects the problems that Europe has now. Young people in Europe are unemployed; the unemployment rate in Italy among people under 30 is about 50%. It is for predominantly the young who make do with temporary, freelance and other forms of short-term work and don't get to establish a firm career. When I was working in Germany some years back, I noticed that the cafés were crowded in the morning with young people, presumably because they had no work to do.

They also inherit the unfunded liabilities of the vast welfare states of Europe, which can be solved in the long term only by devaluation of the euro, which already seems to be underway. If a Young people in Europe feel they've missed out, and justifiably so!

Which reminds me of the visit we had recently from 2 friends from France. They were astonished at the size of our property, house, cars, freeways. The scale of America, which they had never visited before, was stunning. They were having their 1st trip outside Europe in their late 70s.

They live in a very small apartment on the 5th floor of a Paris apartment building with no elevator. They have a small car, which costs them a fortune in taxes, garage fees and enormously expensive gasoline. Even in retirement, a great deal of their income is taken away in taxes. They were living on a third of what we do. They are firm socialists and believe in the socialist model, not understanding that they were in fact *poor*, and getting poorer relative to many other countries.

So it doesn't surprise me that young people at LonCon, primarily Europeans, are a bit disgruntled. I would be too.

-Jim