

In the Beginning – A Very Abbreviated History of the Earliest Days of Science Fiction Fandom

by Rich Lynch

The history of science fiction fandom in certain ways is not unlike the geological history of the Earth. Back in the earliest geological era, most of Earth's land mass was combined into one super-continent, Pangaea. The earliest days of science fiction fandom were comparable, in that once there was a solitary fan group, the Science Fiction League (or SFL), that attempted to bring most of the science fiction fans together into a single organization.

The SFL was created by publisher Hugo Gernsback in the May 1934 issue of *Wonder Stories*. Science fiction fandom was already in existence by then, but it mostly consisted of isolated individuals publishing fan magazines with one or two fan clubs existing in large population centers. This would soon change. That issue of *Wonder* sported the colorful emblem of the SFL on its cover: a wide-bodied multi-rocketed spaceship passing in front of the Earth. Inside, Gernsback's four-page editorial summed up the SFL as an organization "for the furtherance and betterment of the art of science fiction" and implored fans to join the new organization and "spread the gospel of science fiction."

The response was almost immediate. Fans from various parts of the United States wrote enthusiastic letters, many of which were published by Gernsback in *Wonder's* letters column. Some of the respondents started chapters of the SFL in various cities, and most of the science fiction clubs that already existed became affiliates of the SFL. Among the first to do so were clubs in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, which still exist under different names. The first branch of the SFL outside of North America was in Leeds, U.K., and although this branch did not survive long, it became important for a fan event it hosted at the beginning of 1937.

However, the SFL was not destined to be long-lived. In 1936, Gernsback ran into financial difficulties that cost him control of *Wonder*, and as a result, the SFL as well. But even before this, the organization had begun to crumble as independently-minded fans in some of the larger SFL branches successfully advocated that their members renounce SFL affiliation. Other smaller branches of the SFL passed from existence due to lack of interest. Leo Margulies became the publisher of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, the magazine that replaced Gernsback's *Wonder*, and although he publicly stated his support for continuing the SFL, it wasn't the same. Not long afterwards, rival parent organizations, such as Fred Pohl's Science Fictioneers, came into existence, but these too were not destined to play any significant part in the future direction of organized fandom. Instead, a fracturing of fandom began which resulted in dozens of independent fan groups by the late 1930s. In retrospect, science fiction fandom had evolved during the two years of the SFL's existence. Its future, the fandom of today, was not destined to be a pyramid organization under the control of one person or group of people.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hugo Gernsback was also, in large part, the person responsible for the existence of science fiction fanzines. Nearly a decade earlier, in the June 1926 issue of his *Amazing Stories* magazine, Gernsback had noted that there were many science fiction enthusiasts who were buying the magazine but who probably had never met many (if any) other fans. The reason was obvious: the number of fans of the genre was probably only a few score, and since letters printed in *Amazing's* "Discussions" section did not include addresses of the correspondents, it was unlikely that fans would happen across any other fans they didn't already know. In one stroke, Gernsback changed all that – he began publishing names and full addresses for all letters he included in *Amazing*. Almost immediately,

fans started writing letters to other fans rather than just to the magazine. Correspondence networks began to form between fans. It was the birth of modern day science fiction fandom.

It was inevitable that fans themselves would strive to emulate Gernsback and other magazine publishers by editing and producing their own publications. What's surprising is that it took nearly four years before the first of them appeared. The first science fiction fan magazine may have been *The Comet*, edited by Raymond A. Palmer, which appeared in May 1930. It was the official publication of the Science Correspondence Club, a proto-fan organization located in New York City, that included other such notables as P. Schuyler Miller and Aubrey McDermott. *The Comet* (which was subsequently retitled as *Cosmology*) and the Science Correspondence Club itself, for that matter, were not really aimed at the advancement of science fiction, though; instead, the club was devoted to "the furtherance of science and its dissemination among the laymen of the world," an aim that was mirrored in *Cosmology* by publication of such articles as "Chemistry and Atomic Theory" and "What Can Be Observed in a Small Telescope." It had been Gernsback's belief that his young readers should be nurtured into becoming scientists, and that science fiction was just one means to accomplish that goal. Given that backdrop, it's not really surprising that the first fan magazines had a strong science emphasis.

Cosmology eventually did publish material related to science fiction and even some science fiction stories before it ceased publication in 1933. But by then, amateur publications aimed exclusively at the interests of science fiction readers had started to appear. The first of these, in July 1930, was *The Planet*, edited by Allan Glasser. This was a publication of The Scienceers fan club of New York City, that also included in its membership such notables as Julius Unger, Mort Weisinger, and Julius Schwartz. Unlike its predecessor, *The Planet* reported on activities of interest to science fiction readers, such as the expected lineup of stories in Gernsback's next magazine and reviews of stories in magazines that had already been published.

The Planet did not have a very long life – it only lasted for six issues, partly due to dissension that caused a schism in the club that persisted for more than a year. But at the beginning of 1932, The Scienceers, under the co-editorship of Glasser, Schwartz, and Weisinger, published an even more groundbreaking fan publication, *The Time Traveller*, which, because of its larger page count and greater circulation, is sometimes given the honor as the first 'true' fan magazine. It, too, had an emphasis on things of interest to readers of science fiction, rather than the encouragement of young scientists, and featured biographical material about science fiction authors, news, bibliographical listings, and fiction. *The Time Traveller* also encouraged its readers to write letters of comment, and many of them did. Two of the most famous and notable fans of all time first became known in fandom from the letters section of *The Time Traveller*; they were Forrest J Ackerman and Wilson "Bob" Tucker.

It took another couple of years following the demise of *Cosmology* before science fiction fan publications started to appear outside the United States. The first of these originated from perhaps an unexpected place when two issues of *The New Zealand Science Fiction Bulletin* were published near the beginning of 1935. The first notable fan publication from outside the North America, though, was *Novae Terrae*, edited by British fans Maurice K. Hanson and Dennis A. Jacques, which came into existence in early 1936 as a publication of the Nuneaton, U.K., branch of the SFL. *Novae Terrae* ran for 28 issues before the editors handed over the reins in 1939 to a fan from Plumstead, E.J. "Ted" Carnell, who promptly changed the name of the publication to *New Worlds*. Carnell was only able to publish four issues before the onset of the Second World War impacted fandom in the United Kingdom, but the experience was the inspiration for him to try again as an editor after the war, this time with a professional science fiction magazine of the same name.

By the end of the 1930s, fan magazines had mostly replaced personal correspondence as a way of communicating between fans. The example set by *The Planet* and *The Time Traveler* was widely emulated, in that fan magazines became almost exclusively about science fiction. There were some, such

as James V. Taurasi's *Fantasy News*, that served as a frequent (often weekly) source of news of fan activities, and others, such as Sam Moskowitz's *New Fandom*, that contained articles and other material of a more general interest. In general, fan magazines of the 1930s could be called enthusiastic, or unpolished, or informative. But they couldn't be called 'fanzines' because the term hadn't yet been invented. In October 1940, a fan from Charlottesville, Virginia, named Louis Russell Chauvenet suggested that term as an alternative to 'fanmag', which had begun to come into common usage. Other fans, most notably Harry Warner, Jr., soon championed the new word, and it quickly became not just the preferred term for amateur science fiction fan publications, it became the *only* term.

In the decades since the first fanzines appeared, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, have been published – nobody knows exactly how many. The last attempt at a comprehensive checklist of science fiction fan publications was done between December 1952 and November 1959 by two Washington, D.C. fans, Bill Evans and Bob Pavlat, which built on an earlier checklist compiled in the 1940s by another fan, R.D. Swisher. The lack of knowledge about the expanse of fan publications didn't stop people from collecting them, however. Almost as soon as they started appearing, fan magazines became collectable items. At some of the earliest science fiction conventions, fan publishers were encouraged to produce special editions of their journals; the success of these early conventions was due in part to the presence of fans who just couldn't stand the thought of having a dozen or more new fan magazines missing from their collections.

The rapid growth of science fiction fandom during its earliest years made it inevitable that there would be events where fans from different cities could meet face-to-face. The first science fiction conventions were held in the 1930s, although the date and sponsor of the very first convention is a continuing source of controversy. It may have taken place on January 3, 1937, when members of British fandom convened at Leeds, in an event hosted by the Leeds branch of the SFL. There were twenty attendees, including Arthur C. Clarke, Ted Carnell, Walter Gillings, and Eric Frank Russell. The event had been planned and promoted, apparently, for several months prior to the meeting date.

Another contender for the title of 'First Convention' had occurred several months earlier, in Philadelphia, on October 22, 1936, when members of one of New York City's many fan clubs, the International Scientific Association, visited Philadelphia fandom. In all, there were about fifteen attendees, including such well-known fans as Don Wollheim, Bob Madle, Dave Kyle, Milton Rothman, John Baltadonis, and Fred Pohl. This event was much less planned than the later Leeds convention but it still could be considered as a convention, as one of the orders of business was to elect a convention chairman (Rothman, whose home was the convention site) and a secretary (Pohl). There has been some speculation that the actual purpose of the Philadelphia gathering was to upstage the forthcoming Leeds event, though one of the participants, Madle, later stated that none of the attendees were aware the British fans were even planning a convention.

A third possibility for the 'First Convention' occurred even earlier, in late June of 1935, when the Chicago chapter of the SFL sent a small delegation of three fans to New York City for a meeting at the offices of *Wonder Stories*, which served, in effect, as SFL world headquarters. They were to be met by fifteen members from some of the New York SFL chapters, but fate intervened. The Chicago delegation was delayed, and arrived on June 29th, one day later than planned. So instead of an inter-city convention, *Wonder Stories* editor Charles Hornig decided to hold the meeting on June 28th, as planned, with just the New York fans, which included Wollheim, John Michel, Frank Belknap Long, Julius Unger, and Julius Schwartz. When the three Chicago fans arrived on June 29th, only Schwartz was present from the previous day, and the inter-city meeting consisted of him, Hornig, Mort Weisinger, and the Midwest visitors. Still, there is cause for claiming that this meeting, or for that matter, the previous day's meeting, was in fact a convention; there have been conventions in subsequent decades that have

had as low an attendance as these meetings and *many* conventions in the history of fandom that have had as informal a program.

Whatever the claims for the first convention, there can be no doubt that these get-togethers were a success, or that fans really liked having the opportunity to meet with other fans. In 1938, Sam Moskowitz and Will Sykora held what later became known as the First National Science Fiction Convention, in Newark, New Jersey, that brought together an astronomical 125 fans and pros, including the new editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, John W. Campbell, Jr. It was at that convention where plans were laid, under the leadership of Moskowitz, for what was hoped to be an even bigger and more widely-attended convention the following summer, to be held in New York City at the same time as the World's Fair there. There are reports that there was originally the glimmering of an idea to have that 1939 convention actually be part of the World's Fair, or at least be recognized by the World's Fair, but in the end, the 1939 convention only unofficially appropriated the name – it was called the “World Science Fiction Convention.”

That first worldcon was sparsely attended by today's standards – only about 200 people were there, and it was nothing like the multi-tracked extravaganza that worldcon has become and that thousands of us now travel around the world to attend. There have more than sixty Worldcons since that first one in 1939, but 2007 will be the first time a worldcon has come to Asia. For that reason alone, Nippon 2007 will be an historic event, but the history of science fiction fandom itself is still a living, breathing entity and there is still much to be written about it and preserved. So while you are treasuring the moment in Yokohama, you can also be part of the preservation process. Please do meet and take photos of other fans and writers, and write summaries of your experiences and favorite program events in your online journals and fanzines for the rest of us to enjoy. You are invited to be part of the history of this rich and still very young genre. Even though science fiction fandom began 80 years ago, it is by no means crotchety with age. To the contrary – we are still very much in the beginning.