

NovelList

Annotated Book List

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Our Man at L.A. Con by Fred Lerner

At the Space Academy

I grew up with Tom Corbett, Space Cadet. I watched his adventures on television, followed his progress through the Space Academy in a series of cheap novels from Grosset & Dunlap, and craved Space Cadet paraphernalia. I wasn't the only one. The organizers of the 64th World Science Fiction Convention were men and women of my generation, and Tom Corbett was a part of their youth as well. So L.A. Con IV took the Space Academy as its motif, invited Frankie Thomas (who played Tom Corbett fifty years ago on ABC-TV) as a special guest, and made the convention into a celebration of the optimism that pervaded the science fiction we grew up with — and that persists in the genre today.

The pocket program guide may have been titled *Space Cadet Operations Manual*, the dealers' room labeled Academy Book Store, and the Anaheim Convention Center's exhibit hall renamed Cadet Central. But these were light-hearted tributes to science fiction's Golden Age. ("What is the Golden Age of science fiction? Twelve.") Beneath the veneer of nostalgia lay the heart of a worldcon: five days of intense examination (and five nights of intense celebration) of a literature of ideas and the men and women behind them.

The convention took full advantage of its location in Greater Los Angeles and its organizers' connections within the entertainment industry. Strolling across the Quad in Cadet Central one could see the Bridge of *Star Trek's Starship Enterprise* along with figures of the original crew from the Movieland Wax Museum, the time-traveling DeLorean from *Back to the Future* and a replica of the 1966 Batmobile, and a collection of robots from Hollywood sci-fi films of the 1950s. A good part of the convention program was devoted to science fiction movies, television, and computer games. And the L.A. Con opening ceremonies included a complete kinescope of *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet*, in living black-and-white.

Tom Corbett was inspired by **Robert Heinlein's** novel *Space Cadet* (1948). An Annapolis graduate himself, Heinlein was well qualified to imagine the training regime that would turn star-struck teenagers into officers of the Space Patrol. L.A. Con members were encouraged to reread *Space Cadet* before the convention, and to discuss the novel with others when they got there.

Though many of my generation first encountered science fiction in movies, TV shows, or comic books, it was usually the young-adult novels of Robert Heinlein that led us into SF reading. Beginning in 1947, when Scribner's published *Rocket Ship Galileo*, Robert Heinlein transformed the nature of science fiction publishing. Previously confined to pulp magazines and small-press books, SF writers now had an entree into hard covers — and into public and high school libraries. "Juvenile novels," as the publishers and librarians called them, paid their authors a lot more than the magazines did; and their success opened up hardcover and paperback markets to a wide range of science fiction.

Today's SF writers are not reluctant to acknowledge their debt to Heinlein, and as the centenary of his birth approaches interest in both his books and the man behind them remains strong. A panel on "99 Years of Heinlein" brought together five writers who collectively exemplify the wide range of his influence. Bill Patterson's two-volume authorized biography of Robert A. Heinlein is scheduled for release next year, at the Heinlein Centennial conference in Kansas City. **Brad Linaweaver**, author of *Moon of Ice* (1987), is one of the leading figures in libertarian science fiction. L.A. Con IV guest of honor **Connie Willis** is known as one of SF's leading humorists, and **Pat Cadigan** made her reputation as a practitioner of cyberpunk. **Michael Cassutt** has written scripts for *Twilight Zone* as well as several space-opera novels.

Have Space Suit, Will Travel (1958) was the first Heinlein book — and the first SF book — for many readers. "I was

thirteen when I discovered it," said Willis, "and there was no looking back." Young people are still reading these books, and their elders find that they hold up to rereading. What explains their longevity? Unlike today's YA novels, "the Heinlein 'juveniles' are books that show adolescents how to be adults," Linaweaver explained. Willis disagreed: "Their charm is that they aren't trying to teach you anything." Their effects were more subtle than that. "Heinlein was one of the writers who made me even more enthusiastic about reading and writing," said Cadigan. "When I read Heinlein," said Willis, "I felt that I really was in the future."

Confronting the Other

Almost fifty years ago, Robert Heinlein told an audience at the University of Chicago that the purpose of science fiction is "to face up to a complex world, try to figure out what makes it tick, try to cope with it, survive and triumph over it." Science fiction is still doing those things, and several of the most interesting panels at L.A. Con examined the complexities of our universe and how SF writers have explored them.

A panel entitled "Aliens Among Us" confronted the ethical implications of deriving alien cultures from our lesser-known neighbors on Earth. **Robin Wayne Bailey**, president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA), recommended Elman Service's *Profiles in Ethnology* (3rd ed., 1978) as a source for cultural exotica. Caribbean-born **Tobias S. Buckell**, author of *Crystal Rain* (2006), argued that writers need to "honestly engage the culture" rather than simply searching for bits to "freshen up their work." No, said Bailey, "I do this all the time, and I don't apologize for it. Nobody owns their own culture. I have a right to appropriate and use whatever I find valuable in my work, *to the best of my ability*." Sometimes a writer's research influences more than her fiction. **ElizaBeth Gilligan**'s use of Romany culture in her "Silken Magic" alternate history series led her to become an activist for Roma causes.

"Why use aliens?" asked moderator **Don Sakers**. "Why don't we just use the human cultures themselves?" Setting the story in an alien society, Gilligan explained, makes it easier for readers to understand aspects of their own societies because it distances them. Bucknell saw the use of aliens and alien cultures as a valuable metaphor, putting "let's pretend" to work as a tool for understanding.

"I look at psychology as quantum sociology," said "Anthropology of the Future" moderator **Steven Barnes**. He begins building a society "with evolutionary psychology, watching the rules evolve as you go." Mathematician and cyberpunk novelist **Rudy Rucker** believes that "we are the result of planet-wide computation that has been running for millions of years," so perhaps the way we behave is more complex than we realize. He likes to use "knobbly characters" in his stories, finding those in *Star Trek* "too smoothed out." But G. David Nordley, retired air Force major and astronautical engineer, observed that technological and military environments "will act to select the people appropriate to them" — and they are not likely to be the "knobbly" ones.

"Humans are custom-made to live on this planet, and our hard-wiring isn't going to change," said Lisa Snellings-Clark. "We will evolve beyond this only when we leave this planet." Nordley suggested that genetic engineering on Earth, or radiation encountered off-planet, might induce changes in human physiology and behavior. What about the universal spiritual advancement that transforms humanity in **Arthur C. Clarke**'s classic *Childhood's End* (1953)? "If a writer has not had an experience, how can he tell about it?" asked Barnes. "You cannot choreograph an epiphany." (But, Nordley noted, it can be simulated by chemical or electrical stimulation of the brain.) Despite these obstacles, Barnes concluded, "It is our responsibility to write these stories. How else are we going to speak to our great-great-grandchildren?"

Another approach to envisioning alien societies was offered by **Hilari Bell** in "Culture Building 101." After listening to a brief description of the habitat, anatomy, and psychology of an intelligent alien race, the amphibious "ribbits," the participants divided into teams of five or six. Choosing from among seventeen categories, each group proceeded to brainstorm some of the details of ribbit culture. My own group selected "clothing/modesty/profanity" and worked up a description of ribbit costume. Physical environment would be the dominant influence, of course; but given their defined mating behavior and communication patterns, we reasoned that custom would dictate that the ears be cloaked from view even if nothing else was. Our conclusions may have been trivial, but the collaborative process of elaborating how and why patterns of behavior would arise in a particular environment was most instructive. After sharing our groups' contributions to the ribbit culture, we all walked away with one lesson stamped into our consciousness: "everything interconnects."

In the Slipstream

A panel on "Convergence in Post-Modern Fiction" took me into unfamiliar territory. I'm more comfortable with the vocabulary of bibliography and literary history than with that of literary criticism, and my understanding of terms like "post-modern" and "slipstream" is awfully fuzzy. Which, of course, is precisely why I chose this panel: what

better place than a world science fiction convention to fill such gaps in my knowledge?

What is a literary genre? Is it a way of describing popular fiction by its subject matter, a label to tell booksellers on which shelf to place new titles, or a set of rules telling how to read a story? It used to be that genres had rigid boundaries, and the occasional story that crossed them gave cause for comment. Many SF writers also worked in other genres, but except for a few futuristic detective stories (such as **Isaac Asimov's** *The Caves of Steel*, 1954) they rarely combined them.

That has changed. Time travel and space opera romances are growing in popularity, there are several thriving science fiction mystery series, and the borderline between SF and the contemporary thriller is becoming increasingly indistinct. Critic Gary K. Wolfe observed that writers such as **Neal Stephenson** and **James Morrow** are incorporating the techniques of the captivity narrative and the historical novel into their science fiction. And mainstream literary writers are borrowing from science fiction and fantasy — though **John Kessel** noted that they don't necessarily use their concepts and ideas in the same way that SF writers do.

"What can you cut away and still have it unmistakably be what it is?" asked **John Barnes**. Or is being what it is all that important? "People aren't worried as much about the definitions," said Kessel. That's just as well: I'm still not quite sure what is meant by "slipstream." Bruce Sterling, who coined the term, said that "this is a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility." That's more of a description than a definition, but it explains the title of *Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology* (2006). **James Patrick Kelly** and John Kessel, who edited that book, call slipstream "the literature of cognitive dissonance and of strangeness *triumphant*." Their anthology sounds like a promising place to see where convergence is taking us.

The Broad Universe

Whoever accused feminists of having no sense of humor must never have heard of Broad Universe, "an international organization with the primary goal of promoting science fiction, fantasy, and horror written by women." Their newsletter, *The Broadsheet*, contains articles in six categories: "Think" (editorials), "Create" (expert advice on specific aspects of writing), "Sell" (tips on marketing), "Read" (reviews of new books by female writers), "Teach" (resources for teaching SF reading and writing at all levels), and "Gossip" (news of book sales, awards, and obituaries). A weekly update on the BU website (www.broaduniverse.org) provides breaking news. Broad Universe sponsors group readings and a dealer's table at science fiction conventions, maintains a PR database of over 3000 bookstores and other contacts across North America, and produces booklists of award-winning novels and recommended books for children and young adults.

I saw Broad Universe membership ribbons all over L.A. Con, worn by famous writers and people I'd never heard of. I spoke with a few members whom I encountered in the hallways or at the BU dealer's table.

Rebecca K. Rowe's first novel, *Forbidden Cargo* (2006), explores the ramifications of nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and artificial intelligence. Rowe is a recent graduate of the Clarion SF writers' workshop, with a day job as a technical writer. She described Broad Universe as "a nice forum for sharing information on how to deal with agents, promote your book . . . a really good place to get mentored by experienced authors, a nurturing environment." It's especially valuable for women like herself whose work has appeared in small-press venues. BU's Rapid-Fire Readings give writers five minutes to present excerpts from their stories — "like speed-dating for writers and readers" — offering new writers exposure that they wouldn't get on their own.

Lynda Williams is working on an ambitious ten-novel science fiction series with fantasy themes. *The Courtesan Prince* (2005), the first volume of the *Okal Rel saga*, tells of cultural conflict thousands of years in the future and the personal struggles they engender. "It's social science fiction, not technical science fiction, about creating better societies and solving social problems." The novels need not be read in order, which is just as well: the fourth volume, *Throne Price* (co-written with **Alison Sinclair**, 2003) was the first to appear, with the second, *Righteous Anger*, soon to be published. To further complicate matters, a series of small-press novellas by Williams and several others explores subsidiary aspects of the saga. Her 180-page *Guide to the Okal Rel Universe* and the www.okalrel.org website present a wealth of background information on her elaborate constructed universe.

Broad Universe isn't just for newcomers. Some of the leading names in science fiction and fantasy appear on its membership list, including **Suzette Haden Elgin**, **Ellen Kushner**, **Pat Murphy**, and **Ursula K. Le Guin**. And it isn't just for women — anybody interested in discovering some of the most interesting writing in science fiction will find the Broad Universe website worth visiting.

A Conversation with Jay Lake

Jay Lake's first published story appeared five years ago. Since then he has made a name for himself with his short fiction, which won him the 2004 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Three collections have appeared — *Greetings from Lake Wu* (2003), *American Sorrows* (2004), and *Dogs in the Moonlight* (2004) — with two more in the works. His 2005 novel *Rocket Science* is a celebration of the good old days when adolescents built spaceships in their backyards. And he edits anthologies such as the *Polyphony series* (with **Deborah Layne**; six volumes so far, the latest in 2006) and *Spicy Slipstream Stories* (with Nick Maimatas, not yet published).

The science fiction genre can be viewed as an extended conversation among its writers and readers, and Lake has a strong sense of that tradition. He doesn't shy away from describing his own work in terms of other writers. He calls his forthcoming novel *Trial of Flowers* "a decadent urban fantasy" occupying the same narrative space as the stories of **China Miéville**, **Jeff VanderMeer**, and **K. J. Bishop**. Next year's *Mainspring*, "a high concept fantasy about a clockwork earth orbiting the sun on a brass track," is "a *Ringworld* for fantasy geeks." (Its sequel *Escapement*, on which he will begin work this fall, sounds especially promising: "it involves a worldwide conspiracy of librarians.") Referring to the work of **Jack Vance**, **M. John Harrison**, **Gene Wolfe**, and China Miéville, he says that "I'm starting a conversation with *Mainspring* — I'm replying to one with *Trial of Flowers*."

A diplomat's son, Lake grew up in Taiwan, Nigeria, and Bulgaria. Isolated from American culture — "I grew up *never* watching television" — he took up writing, producing stories for years before ever getting published. "Science fiction is fun to write. I love doing the writing, the whole process." He works as a marketing writer and business analyst for a telecommunications company in Omaha, telecommuting from his home in Portland, Oregon. His favorite reading, he told me, is *Fortean Times* and *Technology Review* — two excellent sources for weird ideas. "Interesting things are things that have boundaries and edges and fractures in them."

The Canon of Connie Willis

"I adore Shakespeare," said **Connie Willis** during her Guest of Honor interview. "His comedies get to the heart of the way things are." Science fiction and fantasy have a long tradition of slapstick and satire, but Willis's reputation as the field's leading comic writer harkens back to a more traditional form of comedy. "Shakespeare is the person I try to learn from when I write comedy." *Twelfth Night* is her favorite play, and Viola her favorite heroine.

She also loves Hollywood's screwball comedies where, as in Shakespeare, the deepest feelings of the characters are never mocked, though everything else is. She finds the comic perspective of P.G. Wodehouse ("we're all idiots") more congenial than that of Evelyn Waugh ("you're all idiots"), and she adores Jane Austen because she "gives her villains the kind of comeuppance that people naturally get in real life." Trollope is another of her favorites, and Dickens, too, is a great writer — "but he's somewhat irony-handicapped."

Though we think of Willis as a comic writer, heroism and tragedy have their place in her work. *The sinking of the Titanic* and the London Blitz are her favorite incidents in human history, because they show people at their absolute best, and absolute worst. "I fell in love with the Blitz because I had heard of the Fire Watch at St Paul's," so she went to the cathedral intending to write a poem. From its top gallery she saw the mass of ugly buildings that had replaced those burned. Realizing the significance of the cathedral's survival, she understood the heroism of the ordinary Londoners who carried on during the Blitz. "It's not only England's finest hour, it may be humanity's finest hour."

Out of this admiration came her Hugo-winning novelette "Fire Watch" (1982), the first of several stories of time travel and its moral ambiguities. "We live in a chaotic system [where] things do not have clear easy-to-understand consequences." Thus her time travelers cannot predict the good or the harm that their actions might cause. But they persevere, and so does Connie Willis, who holds that the glory of literature is its "attempt to duplicate the wilderness of the human condition."

Five Days Well Spent

When on the flight homeward I'm already thinking ahead to next year's worldcon, I know it's been a successful convention. My own success at giving some flavor of it is limited by my inability to be ten or twenty places at once. I hope I've managed to convey a sense of the excitement that arises when several hundred of the most imaginative minds on the planet, and several thousand of its most imaginative readers, get together to talk about their favorite literature — just for the fun of it.

Nippon 2007, the 65th World Science Fiction convention, will be held in Yokohama, Japan, on 30 August-3 September 2007. The convention's website is www.nippon2007.org

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