

# WARP

A PUBLICATION OF THE MONTREAL SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY ASSOCIATION

Issue 115



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### On the Cover

This sculpture of a giant robot insect, titled *BIXO*, is the work of Montreal artist "Junko". It's made from dead bicycles retired from Montreal's "BIXI" bikeshare program, and was part of the 2024 Mural Festival on boulevard St-Laurent.

*Photo by Danny Sichel*

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## MonSFFA Calendar of Events

The pandemic has subsided enough that we've switched to a hybrid model: we've resumed our in-person meetings, which will also have a virtual component. Programming will be posted on our website and Facebook page a week or two in advance. Join us at the Hotel Nouvel (1740 René-Lévesque West), or contact [president@monsffa.ca](mailto:president@monsffa.ca) for a Zoom invite.

Meetings are held on the second Saturday of each month, unless we're going on a field trip.

***Stay safe and follow us online!***

**Website:** [www.monsffa.ca](http://www.monsffa.ca)

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/MonSFFA](https://www.facebook.com/MonSFFA)

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## Letters to the Editor

Dear MonSFFen:

Thank you all for issue 114 of *WARP*. The warm weather is finally here, which makes it difficult to stay inside, even with a big workload. Comments will follow, but thank you for the remembrance of Sylvain St-Pierre on the front cover. He left us far too early.

Hello to editor Danny... never enough time to get everything done, I hear ya loud and clear.

My loc... Anime North is just past, and once again, we had excellent sales in the Artists' Alley. We have noticed one thing... the convention has a dull roar of people, and it seems to be getting louder each year. Maybe that's just us at our ages. I made a short inquiry as numbers, and paid attendance was around 26,000, and add staff, vendors, and other warm bodies, and they hit 30,000 people this year. Yvonne had resigned the management of the Vendors' Hall, and she is still very glad she did. So am I.

The use of AI in writing...I have made some very nice and much needed money, editing a series of books for British author D.J. Holmes. His long series of novels, *Empire Rising*, was quite interesting, and helped with getting more editorial experience, but after one book, he decided to cut me loose, and instead of paying me what he was paying me, decided to spend only £20 to put his newest manuscript through an AI editor. When that novel was released, there were many comments on how the editing

was so bad, and the readers could find many more mistakes than the AI system could find. I have no paying customer right now, but I am always looking. I also don't think D.J. Holmes will come back to me; he seems content with an AI editor, even if his readers aren't.

As I type, in three days, on June 2, I will turn 65, and can officially retire. I have applied for my OAS/GIS, and I have been receiving my CPP since I turned 60. It is difficult to believe I am now that old. Looking further on my loc... I have now been with *Amazing Stories* for just over a year and a half, and just last night, *Star Trek: Discovery* end its fifth season and the series itself. Comments on this story?

The May 13th, 2023 meeting... for those of us who enjoy the logic of mathematics, and can enjoy some fiction about it. Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* is a fun read. We have two copies here, and Yvonne had read it several times.

Congratulations to Cathy Palmer-Lister on retiring on top, from the club presidency. There is lots of hard work in running the show, and I would hope there will be some rewards to be had in the future. And, there's a great article on our wartime comics. I'd recommend finding an American fanzine or comics magazine, and submitting this to them. This is history they should know about.

*Tales From the Convention...* Ah, the rush of returning memories. I wrote 19 of those little vignettes, and I have had a 20th

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Photo by Valerie Royall

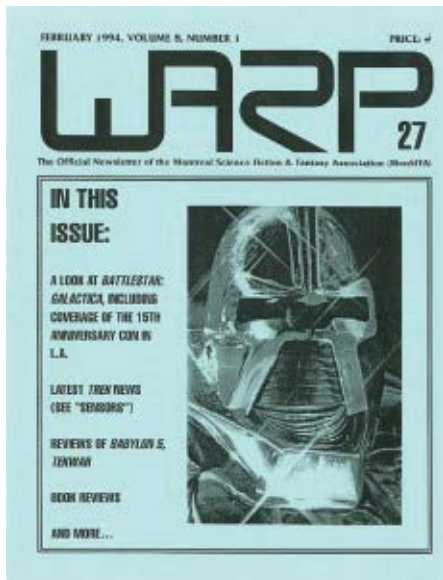
in mind for some time now...I must write it, and soon.

I think I am done. I must be, I am at the end of a page. Thank you for this issue, and I hope what I write here will add to the content pile for next issue, and allow it to come out that much sooner. All sympathies, Danny... See you the next time.

Yours,  
Lloyd Penney  
Etobicoke, ON  
31 May 2024

## Blast From the Past

By Cathy Palmer-Lister



### WARP 27, February 1994

The cover of *WARP 27* features a menacing metal face: a Cylon from the original *Battlestar: Galactica*. The January meeting and this issue of *WARP* were focussed on BG. At the meeting, Keith Braithwaite gave a presentation describing the production history and the popular genres that influenced the tone of the show. Lynda Pelley had attended a *BG* 15th Anniversary convention in LA, and had a slide show to share along with some souvenirs in the raffle. Kevin Holden then followed with a capsulization of a script that was supposed to have been the finale of the show but was never used. *WARP 27* included articles by Lynda and Kevin to follow up on their presentations. More on that in a minute.

The editorial by Lynda begins with the election results. She and Sylvain St-Pierre were re-elected by acclamation to the posts of president and treasurer. Bryan Ekers having indicated that he would not have time to continue as VP, I was roped into the job. Lynda speaks of the implementation of a sign-in book, which reminds me that we seem to have forgotten about it since the pandemic. Having meetings on Zoom makes it a bit difficult, but we should be keeping track of attendance. The February meeting is be a *Star Trek* debate, and members of Montreal area clubs and friends are invited. Lynda mentions 4 clubs: KAG/Kanada's Quemar Squadron, KIDC, Warp 9, and the High Council of Gallifrey. Hard to believe Montreal was once such a hotbed of SF/F fandom! Conv-iction was also scheduled for February, and MonSFFA had purchased 2 tables in the display room. Also included in the fee-free membership for all MonSFFA

members! (Conv-iction was a French SF/F convention which lasted for possibly 3 or 4 years, if memory serves. Not only were there several SF/F clubs, there were several conventions, too.)

Letters were received from Andrew Gurudata, president of the High Council of Gallifrey, MonSFFA member Tifanie Valade, and of course, Lloyd Penney. Andrew wrote to thank us for our support of WhoCon at which Sarah Sutton and Frazer Hines were GoH. The con did not break even, but the loss was acceptable given how much fun everyone had at the con. Cans of food were collected for Share the Warmth and \$311 for the Quebec Society for Disabled Children. Tifanie suggested we remember to include books when we review all things Trek. Lloyd and Keith continued a discussion on the failings of that year's Con-Cept and the definition of fanzine. The fanzine discussion came up also when CSFFA was defining criteria for the Aurora Award just a few years ago. Many zines have no SF/F content at all, and yet are still considered fanzines.

Keith wrote a feature on *WARP* itself, some problems faced over the previous years and measures taken to improve quality and frequency.

MonSFFandom's report on the Christmas/Hanukkah party noted an attendance of about 40 MonSFFen and friends. Nice to see photos of very young Kim and Andrew, and Lynda looking so poised. Keith then goes on to report that in spite of a record-breaking cold snap, over 25 members showed up for the January meeting, and the morning session had five members attend a writers workshop. MonSFFen and friends from KIDC took pledges for WCFE. Hobby World joined the discount programme, which brought the total of participating merchants to 16.

1993 had 7 conventions and mini-cons in Montreal, five of them run by local fans. I attended at least 6; I'm not sure I was at that year's Conv-iction. David Legault wrote a moving review of the Science Fiction Festival, and the wonderful guest, Robin Curtis. Tifanie Valade, following her own advice, wrote reviews of two *Star Trek* novels. They do indeed sound quite interesting, though she admits one might not be to the taste of all. Kevin Holden reviewed the premiere of the second season of *Babylon Five*. Keith reviewed *TekWar*, which I don't remember seeing, either I was not able to view that channel, or because I did not care for the book which I did read. Joe Aspler reviewed *Fatherland* by Robert Harris, a mystery situated in an alternate universe wherein the Nazis won the war. Joe follows this with a rumination on what might have happened in Quebec in this alternate universe. Joe also reviewed the first six books of Glen Cook's fantasy metallic series. I have read the entire series except one I have not been able to get my hands on. It was Jo Walton who introduced me to Glen Cook at a Worldcon. She said I would like his books, and she was right! Joe's review is bang-on.

In the previous *WARP*, Bryan and Kevin had positively reviewed videos which left some of us baffled—*Babes??* Tifanie, in her LoC, called one of the vids "stupid" and "torture to sit through". I remember writing in my "Blast from the Past" article that "it must be a guy thing". Josée Bellemare responded with an article in praise of beefcakes. What's good for the gander, etc. Nice pic of Patrick Stewart wearing nothing but a loincloth. He wasn't always old.

Keith Braithwaite wrote an in-depth review of *Battlestar: Galactica*, created by Glen A. Larson. John Dykstra, who had masterminded *Star Wars*' special effects, was also the SF coordinator on *BG*. Donald Bellisario was one of the producers and writers; he would go on to create *Quantum Leap*. The series started off so well, and then seemed to go off the rails. Keith shares his thoughts on why this occurred. He also described the various influences behind the writing in an article entitled *Space Cowboys, the Book of Galactica*,

and the *Ray Guns of Navarone*. That's a pretty good summation. I don't remember thinking cowboys in space, but certainly got the biblical references which were blatant. Keith ends his article remarking that the show seems to be enjoying a sort of resurgence, possibly nostalgia, and that there was talk of a revival in one form or other. (This did happen, in 2003.)

Kevin Holden followed with an article about the forgotten "conclusion" to *BG*. Apparently, the show was originally conceived as a mini-series, with a beginning and an end. Somebody at a con had copies of the Larson-written conclusion. In some ways it foreshadowed *BG 1980*. The fleet arrives at Earth, realizes Earth cannot protect itself, and essentially kidnaps astronauts from a joint US/Soviet mission. The astronauts, amazed by the starship and advanced tech, return to their countries to prepare their governments for the impending invasion. They are thought insane, or else the danger is actually the colonial fleet. The *Vipers* take off to meet the threat, and find that dozens of US fighter jets are coming along with them. Kevin recalls a scene where a Cylon pilot asks if any Colonial *Vipers* are showing up on the scanner, and the pilot says no. An F-14 shows up and blasts the Cylon ship. As the Cylon tailspins into the ocean, the first pilot says: "You said the area was secure!" "No," replies Cylon number two, "I said there were no Colonial *Vipers*. That was not a *Vip*-" Ka-splash! (This is the kind of silly humour I disliked in *BG 1980*.) The script ends with the destruction of both Colonial and Cylon fleets, Adama using the *Galactica* to ram Baltar's ship to prevent him giving away the location of Earth. On Earth, the cities are burning, and people are looking to rebuild their civilization. According to Kevin, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* is the continuation of the story though Larson was unable to legally use the *BG* references.

Lynda's article was about the 15th reunion convention for *Battlestar: Galactica* in Los Angeles followed. She travelled with Kim and Andrew, would you believe the flight cost her \$291 return? There was a seat sale, but still, \$291 for a return flight to LA! Highlight of a tour of LA's sights was seeing Whoopi Goldberg pull up beside the tour bus at a red light. (There is a photo to prove it.) The con suffered from a lot of snafus starting with the fact that the concom was from Seattle and did a poor job of advertising in LA. Of the expected thousand attendees, they actually had closer to 250. The GoH were volunteering as this was billed as a charity function. Actor guests: Richard Hatch (Apollo), Dirk Benedict (Starbuck), Anne Lockhart (Sheba), Laurette Spang (Cassiopea), Terry Carter (Colonel Tigh), Herb Jefferson Jr. (Boomer), John Dullaghan (Dr. Wilker) Sarah Rush (Rigel). Behind-the-Scenes guests: Glen A. Larson (Producer), John Dykstra (Special Effects), Stu Philips (Composer), Peter Berkes (Sound Design), Jean-Pierre Dorleac (Costume Design), Harker Wade (Unit Production, Manager), Terrence McDonnell (Story Editor/Writer), Jim Carlson (Writer). Lynda also described an impressive display room, but a rather poor dealer room. Saturday night, the con was moved to Universal Studios, and the masquerade was held on the *Star Trek* stage of the *Star Trek Adventure Theatre*, with Dirk Benedict as MC. A Keith Braithwaite cartoon appeared below the review.



WITH THE COLLAPSE OF THE CYLON EMPIRE, MILITARY BUDGETS WERE CUT AND ADAMA AND CREW FOUND THEMSELVES OCCUPIED IN PEACE-TIME JOBS.

*Sensors* begins with the story line of the upcoming *Star Trek VII* movie. How did they know so much before the film actually hit the screen? There is also speculation that the captain of *Voyager* will be a woman. Largely due to *Jurassic Park*, dinosaurs were often in the news. Someone paid \$6066 for fossilized dino dung. Science was starting to consider the crater off the Yucatan peninsula as the smoking gun for the extinction of the dinos. MonSFFan Bernard Reichl was to be fan GoH at SF Festival II, and Concinity in Ottawa. There was an ad for Toronto Trek VIII at the Regal Constellation, GoH Majel Barrett, a flyer for Ad Astra 14 headlined by the de Camps (L. Sprague and Catherine), and Diane Duane and Peter Morwood, and finally a flyer from Conv-iction to be held at the Maritime Hotel.

## MonSFFandom

By Keith Braithwaite

Covering club meetings and events held from May 2024 to December 2024, this reporting is derived largely from the pages of *Impulse*, MonSFFA's news bulletin.

### LOCAL SF WRITER GUESTS AT CLUB'S MAY MEETING

With *WARP* editor Danny Sichel making the necessary arrangements, MonSFFA welcomed locally-based SF writer Rich Larson to speak at our May 11, 2024 meeting. Acclaimed as one of SF's best new writers in over a decade, Rich's books include *Annex*, *Ymir*, and the short story collection *Tomorrow Factory*. One of his stories was adapted for screen as an Emmy-winning episode of *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS*.

Introducing himself to our group and fielding questions from the assembled MonSFFen, Rich spoke on his personal creative process, his influences, the technicalities of writing short fiction as compared to novels, his approach to and experiences with editors, and upcoming projects.



SF writer Rich Larson, guest speaker at club's May meeting.

Rich's short fiction, often no more than a couple thousand words, manages to deliver full, well-rounded, compelling stories in but those few paragraphs—no easy feat, it was noted. Bradburyesque, Rich hooks the reader with a clever idea, evocative prose, and captivating characters, capping his tales with a punch of an ending! (Some of his work can be read online: [https://www.freesfonline.net/authors/Rich\\_Larson.html](https://www.freesfonline.net/authors/Rich_Larson.html))

MonSFFen enjoyed a most interesting, informative, and inspiring hour or so, and we expressed our gratitude to Rich for agreeing to visit our group.

Also, Joe Aspler offered an engaging presentation on “The Lost Worlds of SF&E,” examples of which included Conan Doyle’s classic 1912 novel, the seminal works of author H. Rider Haggard, and such silver-screen representations as *Lost Horizon*’s Shangri-La and King Kong’s home, Skull Island.

Danny Sichel closed the meeting, leading an energetic discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of different mediums when telling a genre story.

### CLUB’S 2024 FIELD TRIP

On Saturday, June 8, a party of MonSFFen embarked upon a safari to the recently refurbished Montreal Biodôme in the city’s East End, a destination to which we had previously travelled some years ago, pre-renovations.

Situated next to the Olympic Stadium, the Biodôme is a large, indoor zoological park. Both flora and fauna are on view within five distinct representations of Canadian and other ecosystems. Visitors follow a path which snakes through the entire exhibit, immersing folk deep within, for instance, a tropical rainforest.

As our group proceeded along this path, we snapped photos of the environments, and observed the various animals—colourful, exotic birds and waterfowl, scampering Golden Lion Tamarins, Capybaras (the largest rodents in the world), industrious Beavers, playful River Otters, Penguins, Puffins, a sleepy Canadian Lynx, fluttering Fruit Bats, and assorted reptiles, amphibians, and fish.

The newly renovated facility has added an upper observation platform, offering panoramic views from on high, and an interpretive behind-the-scenes section on the care and feeding of the animals.

A most enjoyable afternoon was had by all.

### PERFECT WEATHER FOR CLUB’S 2024 SUMMER BBQ

Sunny and breezy, the weather could not have been more favourable as MonSFFen gathered under the shade of a line of trees for the club’s summer barbecue in Parc Maisonneuve on Sunday, July 14. This annual event welcomes MonSFFen to a picnic in the fresh air and sunshine, grilling hotdogs, burgers, or chicken strips, quaffing cool refreshments, enjoying the company of friends, playing the occasional game of ring-toss or such, and whiling the afternoon away chatting on all sorts of topics.

At one point on this occasion, some recalled camping as Boy Scouts in the days of their youth, which led to our performing an impromptu scientific experiment! With an adjacent tree obliging, we sought to demonstrate that fresh, running sap applied to the end of small stick will propel said stick across water, like a tiny motor boat. As it happened, the previous day’s rain had formed a shallow



*Clockwise from top-left: Joe Aspler gives presentation at May club meeting; Dominique Durocher, Cathy Palmer-Lister on safari at Montreal Biodôme in June; Golden Lion Tamarin, a denizen of the Biodôme; MonSFFen observe “impromptu scientific experiment” during club’s summer barbecue in July (Photos by Keith Braithwaite and Joe Aspler)*

pond nearby and indeed, our sap-powered “boat” pushed forward through the water, leaving an oily slick in its wake. Tree sap consists of hydrophobic molecules—substances that repel water, thus pushing the stick across the surface of the pond. Energy crisis solved!

### 2024’s e-PICNIC INCLUDES FIRST MEETING OF SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (SIG) FOR ART

For the benefit of those club members who couldn’t make it to our summer barbecue, as well as for the benefit of out-of-town MonSFFen, we held, on Sunday, July 28, a virtual picnic on ZOOM. This provided the opportunity for club members to connect online for a virtual version of our barbecue. With each participant having on hand their own favourite summer snacks and beverages, folk touched base and conversation on a variety of topics ensued.

With photos and video clips courtesy of Keith Braithwaite, Joe Aspler, Daniel P. Kenney, and Josée Bellemare, we shared with the group a PowerPoint slideshow of our visit to the Biodôme in June so that those who had attended could relive the experience, and those who hadn’t been able to join us on our field trip could enjoy a cyber-tour. Several MonSFFen also shared various individual sci-fi summer vacation adventures, including a visit to an *X-Files* museum in upstate New York, and a major scale-modelling convention. Even a local model train show offered a fair measure of sci-fi content!

Incorporated into this e-Picnic was the very first meeting of the club’s Special Interest Group (SIG) for Art, which saw host Keith Braithwaite give a talk on creating sci-fi art without necessarily knowing how to draw! Drawing upon the aesthetics, and some of the techniques of Pop Art, Keith offered a live demonstration of how one might assemble from one’s own photographs and/or images culled from the Web a “digital collage.” Then, by applying the various

rendering tools, art filters, and colour-adjustments of commercially available applications like Photoshop Elements, compositions that look like oil paintings, charcoal and pencil sketches, ink drawings, or watercolours can be created.

## AGENDA REWORKED FOR AUGUST CLUB MEETING

Unfortunate and unavoidable real-world issues delayed the timely completion of two of our scheduled presentations, necessitating an eleventh-hour reworking of our August 2024 meeting agenda. Thankfully, several members stepped up on the spot to fill in the unexpected programming vacuum, and we were very appreciative of their efforts.

Our planned primer on Tom Swift had to be postponed and was rescheduled for the following month, while our discussion of “The Multiverse” was replaced by a discussion of superpowers, namely the unforeseen downsides of possessing certain superpowers. The multiverse discussion was pushed ahead to a future date.

Meanwhile, a third programming item was plagued by technical issues with our projector system, and proved to be absent a few key, misplaced elements; this one had to be offered in an abridged version.

Sometimes, fate conspires to trip us up, and our August meeting was a textbook example of one such occasion! That is why we always caution that programming is subject to change.

But all of that said, the meeting was well received and folk enjoyed themselves despite all these glitches in our Matrix.

Keith Braithwaite opened proceedings with a game originally put together by our late friend and fellow MonSFFAn, Sylvain St-Pierre. Players were challenged to view a still image or video clip from a sci-fi film or TV show, then recall several insignificant, trivial details about what they had just seen, betting poker chips on how much they would be able to accurately recollect.

Danny Sichel steered our aforementioned discussion of the downside of superpowers, in which it was noted that we must first suspend our disbelief and accept that such powers are bestowed upon a person by means of “bullshit space magic!”

MonSFFen were asked to consider that a power like x-ray vision, for example, could mean that rather than a so-gifted individual gazing upon the naked form of a lovely woman through her clothing, he would see her, and everyone else, as a skeleton! Immortality might seem fine at first, until the people you know and love, your family and friends, grow old and die while you live on. In another few million or billion years, will mankind even still be around? Will we have destroyed ourselves, or gone extinct, leaving the sole surviving immortal human all alone on an empty planet, or in world teeming with a non-human form of life that has evolved in the wake of mankind’s exit from the scene?

Danny explored with the group these and other unforeseen consequences of possessing various superpowers.

We also outlined plans for the staging of our upcoming used

book sale, asking club members to help out with the transportation of boxes of books, the setting up of our vendor tables, and the dismantling of the whole affair at day’s end.

Finally, we closed with a quick listing of the coolest handheld sci-fi gadgets and gizmos—ray guns, communication devices, magic wands, that sort of thing—MonSFFen piping up with their favourites.

## SEPTEMBER 2024 MonSFFA MEETING

MonSFFA’s meeting of September 14 opened with a report on the 2024 Worldcon, which was held in Glasgow, Scotland the previous month, and which MonSFFen Joe Aspler and Cathy Palmer-Lister attended.

Joe screened photos of the event as he reviewed the convention, highlighting the venue, masquerade and hall costumes, special musical performances, art show, Hugo ceremony, dealers’ room—which he noted was copiously stocked with books—and the wealth of panel programming typical of a Worldcon. He had opportunity to meet a few famous authors, like Joe Haldeman, and Scottish writer and Guest of Honour Ken MacLeod. Similarly, Cathy outlined her impressions of and experiences at the convention, the science panels of which she quite enjoyed.

She and Joe also spoke of their sightseeing excursions, taking in several museums and visiting landmarks, like the town of Linlithgow, billed as the birthplace of Starfleet Master Engineer Montgomery Scott!

Unique to this Worldcon was an official tartan and an official gin, along with a cocktail!

Joe and Cathy both rated the Glasgow Worldcon highly, having found the event very well organized and run.

Also presented to the group was the available information on hand regarding a current Montreal bid to host the Worldcon in 2027.

Mark Burakoff was up next with an overview of the original, and

subsequent Tom Swift book series. Created by publisher Edward Stratemeyer, the famous boy inventor has been a part of the science fiction pantheon since the early 20th century, extending well into the 21st, and is credited with helping to popularize the nascent genre that would eventually be called science fiction. Mark, a collector of Tom Swift books, showcased a handful of volumes from his bookshelves, the earliest dating back to the original series of 1910-1941.

He noted that the character was initially portrayed as a gifted young tinkerer having an aptitude for mechanics and electronics. The first title was *Tom Swift and his Motor Cycle* (1910). As the series progressed, the inventions around which each story was built became more innovative, ahead of conventional science and technology, and more pronounceably science fiction. Later titles included *Tom Swift and his Electric Rifle* (1911) and *Tom Swift and his Magnetic Silencer* (1941).

Penned by numerous ghostwriters under the house pseudonym Victor Appleton, and later Victor Appleton II, Tom Swift, his son, Tom Swift, Jr, and all other incarnations of the character, paved the way for such as Jonny Quest and Joe 90. And, the original



*September's meeting topics*

Tom Swift begat later well-known Stratemeyer creations The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew.

Keith Braithwaite closed the afternoon with a treatise on the art of naming science fiction and fantasy characters. From the etymology of names to the sound of a name spoken aloud and its subliminal sway—hero, villain, sidekick—Keith explored some of the means by which authors arrive at an evocative, memorable name for a character. Many play with spelling, or fashion portmanteaus, for example, drawing inspiration from their own families or friends, or from persons they admire.

Careful stickhandling was in order, Keith advised, when it comes to overly long or unpronounceable alien names, which can often annoy readers. He further stressed the importance of properly matching names to time and place when writing genre fiction set in a particular historical period.

Online name generators can be helpful, as well as old telephone directories or census reports. Certain names just sound right for a certain type of character, Keith stated, and so a writer sometimes relies on their own emotional response to a name. This must be balanced, however, against the level of enthusiasm for the name the writer believes his or her readership will likely hold.

Keith closed by sharing some of his favourite sci-fi names, and putting up a name-generating chart so that each of the group could determine their individual space-alien name!

### THE SUCCESSFUL RETURN OF MonSFFA'S SUPER SCI-FI BOOK SALE!

The club's Super Sci-Fi Book Sale returned in October after a five-year, pandemic-related hiatus, and was deemed a resounding success! This book sale is MonSFFA's principal fund-raiser. All proceeds from the sale are directed to the operating budget of the club, and the 2024 edition took in just shy of \$1000 in revenue, among our top results.

After several years absent, there had been concern that the book sale might well have faded from the consciousness of local SF/F fandom. But patrons were lined up at the door prior to our opening the sale and as we learned, people had very much missed the annual event and were glad to welcome its return. Many urged the club to hold the sale twice a year, spring and fall!

MonSFFA's Executive expressed its thanks to all the volunteers who helped with the transportation of our stock of books, set up our sales tables, and packed it all away at day's end. With many thousands of books to handle, this was, to be certain, a monumental task, and the sale simply could not have operated so smoothly without our team of volunteers!

Thanks was also extended to those folk who donated books to the cause, thus contributing to the robust inventory of publications on offer to the public—hardcovers, paperbacks, comics, and magazines! As part of our dearly departed friend Sylvain St-Pierre's legacy, many more French-language books were available, to the delight of shoppers.

Our "Big Box Bulk Bargain" again proved popular, with customers taking advantage of the opportunity to score a full box of books for only \$15! Most bought several such lots. By the end of the afternoon, we had sold several thousand publications of all kinds, roughly half of our total on-site inventory.

In the wake of the sale, a selection of particularly valuable specialty books were sold online, adding to the total revenue raised. MonSFFA treasurer Joe Aspler later reported a final revenue figure just north of \$1500.

A final acknowledgement is here tendered to all those book-loving fans who attended and purchased books; may you all have good reads, and thank you for helping to support our club. We will be pleased to welcome you back to our 2025 sale!

### NOVEMBER 2024 MonSFFA MEETING

November's MonSFFA meeting, our last of the calendar year, was held a little later in the month than usual due to room-availability issues. We met on Saturday, the 23rd.

Club treasurer Joe Aspler opened proceedings with his report on October's fund-raising used book sale, providing sales data, financial details, and an overview of the event. With an eye to making improvements in future, he pointed out that which he thought had worked well from an organizational perspective, and that which had not. MonSFFen chimed in with their own impressions of the sale, which overall, the group gauged to have been a success.

With the season upon us, Brian Knapp offered a presentation on Christmas and Holiday-themed SF/F. Participating in the meeting remotely over ZOOM, he cited a variety of stories by genre authors, including several by such venerable writers as Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, and Isaac Asimov. He found that more than a few of the stories his research uncovered were, essentially, variations on or updates of Charles Dickens' Victorian classic "A Christmas Carol." Others provided a sci-fi interpretation of Santa Claus, while still others offered astronomical/scientific takes on the famous Star of Bethlehem featured in traditional Christmas lore.

Brian also listed several small- and big-screen examples, including a couple of classic *Twilight Zone* episodes. He covered in-depth a rarely rebroadcast, rather dark TV movie written by *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling. This 1964 production was called *Carol for Another Christmas* and starred Sterling Hayden as a rich industrialist named Daniel Grudge, the Scrooge of the piece. Unfortunately, technical issues with sound somewhat marred the various video-clips Brian shared with the group, but this problem was eventually resolved.

We closed the afternoon with a group brainstorming session on programming ideas for 2025's meetings. We also lined up a preliminary meeting schedule for the coming year.

In addition, Keith Braithwaite offered a game in which folk raced against the clock to decipher anagrams related to Christmas and having a sci-fi connection. Danny Sichel proved indomitably adept at this challenge!

### 2024 HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

The club celebrated the 2024 festive season with, first, our traditional downtown Christmas Dinner and Party, then a virtual get-together the following weekend.

The dinner/party was held on Saturday evening, December 7 at Le Nouvel Hotel's in-house restaurant, the Novella. Folk enjoyed a fine meal and drinks while our traditional fund-raising raffle provided each attendee with not one, but two prizes, beautifully gift wrapped for the occasion.

The following weekend, we closed out another year of MonSFFA activities with a casual, online get-together, via ZOOM, to allow out-of-town club members, and those who had been unable to attend the previous Saturday's dinner, to touch base and exchange Holiday greetings.

A festive time was had by all!



# Book Review: *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence* by R. F. Kuang

By Joe Aspler

This is the Hugo Award winner that could have been. *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence* (hereafter called *Babel*) is one of the best SF novels of recent years. It won the Nebula Award, and would have been a strong contender for the Hugo as well. The details of how *Babel* was disqualified from the Hugo ballot have been covered elsewhere in painful detail, so I will only summarize.

Rebecca Kuang is a Chinese-born American SF writer, educated at Oxford, Cambridge, and Yale. She is recognized as a major new writer in our field. She won the Astounding Award for Best New Writer in 2018, the same year her first novel *The Poppy War* was nominated for a Nebula. Her fourth novel *Babel* won the Nebula. She accomplished all of this before the age of 30.

*Babel* should have been on the Hugo ballot for the 2023 Chengdu Worldcon – the first Worldcon in China. It quite possibly would have won. Except that .... the work was declared “ineligible” by the Hugo Administrators. Huang has expressed opinions that are critical of the current regime in China. When the full list of works nominated for the Hugos was finally released, *Babel* had the third highest number of nominations. Yet it had been declared “ineligible” for unnamed reasons. At first it was thought that interference or pressure from the government of China was responsible. Now it seems that the cause was the Hugo Administrators’ panic/cowardice they might possibly offend their hosts. Several other works were also arbitrarily declared “ineligible”. The exclusion of *Babel* and other work from the Hugo ballot is just the latest in a series of scandals to strike the Hugos.

*Babel* is a modern masterpiece, combining aspects of alternate history with science fiction and fantasy, along with commentary on past historical injustices and a not-too-subtle nod to our current dependence on technology.

Set in the 1830s, much of *Babel* takes place at Oxford University. It’s not the Oxford of our world. In the world of *Babel*,

silver has magical properties, and Britain controls the world by controlling the supply of magical silver. Britain controlled much of the wealth in our world too, but now we have the additional magic monopoly. You don’t need British engineering to hold up London Bridge. You need magical silver. Who needs modern medicine, when two words—a “match pair” from different languages spoken over

a bar of magic silver—will cure you, as we find on the second page of the novel. In this world, “silver-working” does not mean fashioning jewellery. It means finding those word pairs that control the magic inherent in silver.

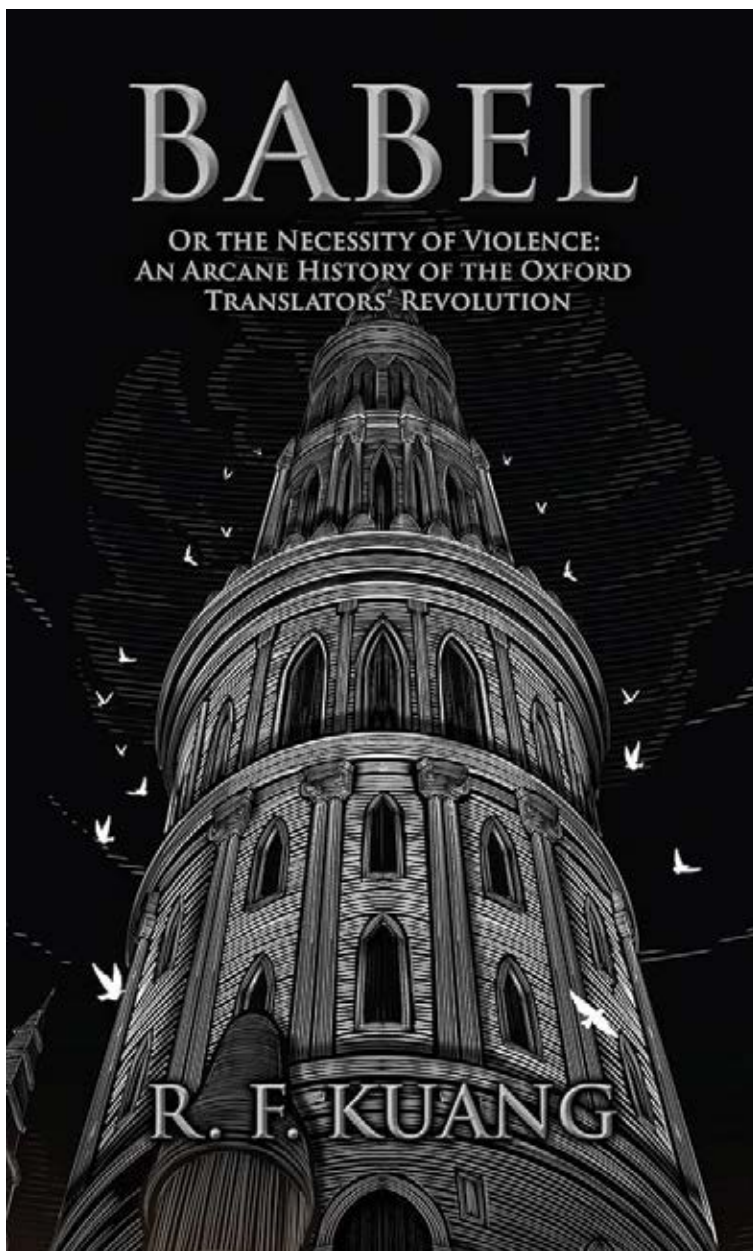
The protagonist is Robin Swift, an orphan with a Chinese mother and an unknown European father. That’s not his real name, of course. He had to take a new name to sound more English. A mysterious English benefactor, Professor Lovell of Oxford, rescues him from cholera and poverty in Canton. After years of study at the estate of his benefactor, Robin is sent to Oxford to study at the Royal Institute of Translation, known worldwide as Babel. He finds himself a group of friends, many of a similar foreign origin. In this world, languages mean power. English and other European words are losing their force, so the British Empire needs to control more languages.

Robin grows from a poor orphan to a brilliant student to a young man resentful of British control over the world. The Opium War was a real event in our world, one of the worst excesses of the British Empire. Both Britain in our world and in the world of *Babel* did not want to trade silver for Chinese goods. Both Britains started a war to force opium on

China. Some things are constant in history. In the world of *Babel*, the Opium War provides the tipping point for rebellion against the magical status quo. Rebellion spreads, and...

Conclusion: one of the best SF novels of the last few years, and is bound to be a classic. The theft of its Hugo opportunity has only enhanced its reputation.

Also—look for the *Doctor Who* reference.



# Con Report: Scintillation 5

By Danny Sichel

On June 14-16, 2024, I attended Scintillation 5, **Jo Walton's** small literary con—and this time, I took extensive notes. (A lot of stuff has been omitted, because “extensive” is “+23,000 words”. Sentences not in quotation marks are probably paraphrased, and may have been reorganized and consolidated for clarity and length. Sentences in quotation marks are less likely to be paraphrased, but may not be exactly what was said. ‘M’ = Moderator.)

Scintillation 6 will take place June 6-8, 2025, in the Holiday Inn, Montreal—the one with the pagoda on the roof.

## 1: The Goodreads panel

Four readers (Lewis Powell, Sabina Pagotto, Thomas Noriega (M), Beth Friedman) each suggested one book for them all to read, and then they all discussed them.

Lewis: *Mind of My Mind* (Octavia Butler)

Thomas: *Soldier of the Mist* (Gene Wolfe)

Sabina: *The Death I Gave Him* (Em X. Liu)

Beth: *Growing Up Weightless* (John M. Ford)

**Lewis** read *Mind of My Mind* (his first Butler) in 2 ½ days and felt gross for 3 days afterward, then binged every other Butler. “Deeply affecting”—sympathy for the protagonist, hoping she’d win, even though that would lead to something ghastly and horrible. **Sabrina** had read Butler before, and echoes the ‘gross,’ but also notes that one gets very deeply involved with the characters. It was **Thomas’** first Butler too; he compared it to Cronenberg’s *Scanners* (“*Scanners* didn’t work for me, but *MoMM* did”). “I don’t know what it’s like to be a telepath, but this book has such a strong sense of what it’s like to be not just in your own mind (...) great job of showing what people with this power would undergo in a world as loud as ours is.” **Beth** found it very readable (had read Butler before), but also super creepy. “It’s about both race and slavery. (...) Didn’t feel that I (as a white person) could judge it appropriately. It’s a horrible world where people are happy because they are forced to be. Horrible things I want to get out of my brain. I’m glad I read it.”

**Thomas** likes *Soldier of the Mist* because it takes the gods seriously. Many other books just have gods as an excuse; this treats them as present and serious and real and *alien*. You can’t just use them. Note that Latro is an unreliable narrator in a different way in every chapter!

**Beth** invoked the 8 Deadly Words—“I don’t care what happens to these people”—because the characters keep changing and dying. There’s no plot or structure, just unconnected events. She enjoyed the book and its fascinating background, but won’t read the sequels. **Lewis** noted that all the placenames are calques, but that’s just Easter Eggs—we don’t need that, like how we don’t need to know which book battle represents which real battle. “What if someone was walking around in Herodotus, talking to the gods?” Is Latro’s lack of agency a commentary on *Clash of the Titans*, where humans had no choice? “We’re just pawns in their games – the protagonist can’t protagonize.”

**Sabrina** loved the framing device, which reminded her of Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*, and found the book works even without a classics education (Wikipedia was helpful).

**Beth** notes that *Growing Up Weightless* is classed as YA, with standard 15-year-old rebellion. Praised seamless switches between Matt’s viewpoint and his parents. Loved the book, but thought the ending fell apart a bit—“typical Ford ‘what happened here?’” It was **Lewis’s** first Ford; he hadn’t intended to read it all in one sitting. It has accurately-captured teenagers, but accurately-captured teenagers can be very annoying—“why don’t these characters just talk to each other? ... Because he’s 15 and won’t talk to his parents.” Loved the worldbuilding—“I would read 3-4 more books about this world he has constructed with lunar politics—all I wanted was chapter breaks so I could know when I could eat dinner.” **Sabrina** enjoyed the adult political drama (“Ford predicted Zoom committee meetings!”) and the way the teens played RPGs (“‘Lafayette Lonestar’ is the perfect stupid character name chosen by a teen”). **Thomas** started reading it before it was chosen for the panel, then put it down for a year during which he kept remembering amazing imagery (running on the moon! tourists!) “even though not much happens in the book”. It’s a snapshot of how the moon *is*, not just of Matt’s adolescence.

**Sabrina** chose *The Death I Gave Him* to support a local author. *Hamlet* as a future murder mystery: the head of the immortality lab is murdered, and his son locks everyone in and uses the lab’s HORATIO system to investigate... as seen several hundred years later by a student writing a master’s thesis. Parts are regular narrative, parts are survivor memoirs, parts are court documents. The footnotes are amazing extra worldbuilding – what’s the world like if the student feels the need to highlight (X)? **Thomas** was wary of it as a Shakespeare retelling, but enjoyed it. Noted that many characters aren’t 1:1 ports—may be fused or split. “The survivor character is split into a million fragments”. Very empathetic book, possibly because of Liu’s medical training. Observed “very tactile imagery” re: immortality and details of the murder. “A lot of horror tropes”—pace is ‘electric’. Also pointed out “it takes place in a world where *Hamlet* never existed, otherwise people would’ve known better”. **Beth** liked it the least: for her, *Hamlet* is about the language, which was absent here. “Reading it was a very unpleasant experience”. Said that Liu mucked with the plot in interesting ways (e.g., Gertrude has more agency), but ultimately a failure. Felt it would be a lesser mystery without the knowledge that it’s *Hamlet*-based. **Lewis** pointed out how divisive the book is, and noted that some of the characters are obvious ports and others aren’t, so despite the prose being smooth and the horror elements well done, he kept being distracted by wondering which parts were Shakespeare and which weren’t: it’d be easier to read if you’re not looking for parallels.

What do these books have in common: perspective. “Who’s telling the story makes a big difference.” Also, they all have rotating viewpoints. They all have disability accommodation issues (less so *The Death I Gave Him*); they’re all about family secrets (children vs parents, or Latro vs the gods, or Latro vs his slavegirl Io); they’re all about boundaries of one’s mind.

## 2: How Do You Title a Book?

(I attended this one but I don’t have notes on it because I was having charger issues.)

### 3: “That’s Not How That Works!”

Audience members ask five experts (Mike Booth, Grace Burson, Ruthanna Emrys, Gretchen McCulloch (M), Sabina Pagotto) stupid questions, and the experts patiently explain “that’s not how that works.”

**Mike:** “do lasers really go PEW-PEW-PEW? They *should*, but do they?” “They sound like air conditioners, or go SNAP when things burn out, or, with enough power, ionize the air and make lightning.”

**Grace:** “do people at childbirths need to boil water?” “Hand sanitizers have replaced boiling water, but are less useful for tea.”

“How many days can you gallop a horse?” “A few minutes. Longer if you’re willing to kill your horse.”

**Sabina:** “What can be done in a corset?” “Most things except bending and slouching.”

**Mike:** “if a taser zaps a metal implement... in a movie, it’d explode.”

**Sabina:** “codpieces are just for vanity.” **Gretchen:** “not for storing cod?”

**Ruthanna:** “I cannot tell you about secret labs.”

**Gretchen** is annoyed by translations that are forced to rhyme; also, hieroglyphs are letters, not emoji.

**Audience:** “Scientists know all science, right?” “If you’re really smart, you get 7 Ph.D.’s, right?” “If you’re smart enough to get a doctorate, you’re smart enough to know you don’t want to do it again.” “Do all historians know all history? Do all linguists know all words?”

**Mike:** “lasers burning perfectly round holes... actually, yes. With hours of calibration.”

**Ruthanna:** “Oxytocin does not work the way many people, including oxytocin researchers, think.”

**Grace:** “The birth scene in *Children of Men* is the most inaccurate thing I’ve ever seen!”

**Grace:** “If you live in space for generations, you become immune to radiation? ... That’s not covered in doula training.”

**Ruthanna:** least favorite idea is the One Solo Scientist Who Knows the Important Secret of How the Important Thing Works (e.g., the Robot Infiltrator Detector in *Battlestar Galactica*—why did no one demand the scientist train other people in using it?).

### 4: Moving Through the World: Writing Travel

Victoria Goddard, Rosemary Kirstein, Ada Palmer (M), Alison Sinclair, Su Sokol

*A journey is a plot in itself – you can see the worldbuilding!*

**Ada:** there may be suspense about whether the journey will succeed. Shock readers by violating conventions: “but at what cost!” When we read a murder mystery, we know there’ll be a murder; when we read a romance, we know they’ll get together. In journey stories, though?

**Su:** her *Cycling to Asylum* (considered a risky title because of alternate meanings of ‘asylum’) is about reaching Montreal – which the characters do halfway through. The rest of the book is, can they stay?

*Generation ship stories – do they reach their destination, or is the story about shipboard life?*

**Rosemary:** those stories are journeys without being journeys, because the environment goes with you.

**Alison:** Also, it’s not the travelers who finish the journey, it’s their descendants.

**Ada:** one aspect of depicting journeys is depicting *time*. How to depict tedium without being tedious? A 15-minute encounter can take several pages, and a six-week interval can be just “six weeks

passed”.

**Victoria:** Super-detailed moments aren’t necessarily event-rich—they can be perception. Also, SF/F writers are usually in non-modern settings and thus ‘mode of travel’ can be worldbuilding too.

**Ada:** tech levels that we don’t use, “tech voyeurism”. We can take a leisurely cruise across the ocean—except if it’s urgent. Unless that’s been taken away. So there’s voyeurism and excitement in settings where this is the optimal method.

**Alison:** post-asteroid-impact, someone needs to get from South Carolina to Baltimore and the best option is bicycle.

**Victoria:** on trips, you can be looking for stuff you don’t get with more efficient modes of travel (horseback! Pilgrimage!)

**Ada** mentions the manga *Garden*, about abstract shape-creatures moving through an incomprehensible garden—it’s clearly a journey, but why? Then at the end they take a selfie and it’s a specific Kandinsky painting. The anime *Gunbuster*, about journeys with time dilation—a 12-second difference can mean decades of separation. She chokes up when describing the ending: 10 minutes of decel and turnaround for the pilots means 12,000 years on Earth... when they get back, Earth is all one megacity, which goes black, then lights up with the kanji for “Welcome Home”.

*How well do you need to know the landscape before you write it? Or do you develop it as you go along?*

**Alison:** character’s viewpoint affects what you need to know—‘what if I need to convey something the character would never notice?’

**Su:** small details create the illusion that you know what you’re talking about.

**Rosemary** had to learn a lot about grass to write *The Outskirter’s Secret*, and this was pre-internet. Know where the character is from, and what they’ll compare things to.

**Ada:** a Viking might compare color to “poppies—*Southern* poppies, not the proper golden ones”.

**Victoria** had a prairie friend who compared Lake Superior to grainfields.

### 5: Shaping a Story for Different Media

Eugene Fischer, Michèle LaFramboise, Ada Palmer (M), Andrew Plotkin, Jesse Scoble

**Ada:** some media (TV, radio, stage) have their own momentum, like a treadmill you keep up with. Comics, prose, poems—you set the pace.

**Eugene:** Pacing is very different between 1-hour drama and book. A book ends when it ends, a drama ends after 1 hour, and if you don’t meet those constraints you won’t sell your script. On average, 1 page = 1 minute. By page 10 of a script, you should know a lot of things, including who the protagonist is; in some books, that’s not even revealed in the first chapter.

**Andrew:** Game writing. The player controls the pacing, but the pacing is not of the story. It’s an exploration of the game world.

**Ada:** Consider museum exhibit sign text! You don’t know in what order people will read the signs, or if they’ll read all of them. She cites a class where students have to describe an item; final exam is “reduce your description to 75 words”.

**Eugene:** in game writing, each line has to play several roles.

**Ada:** In a play, all the characters are on stage. To the audience, everyone is “them”, no one is “I”. Compare to how gamers will switch between third-person to first: “In the castle, I did this” vs “In the castle, I made the hero do this”. Film, TV, theater—all in the “they” zone.

**Andrew:** doing scenes from a specific character's viewpoint is very easy in comics and text games but not in TV/movies. Second-person is so ubiquitous in games and so rare elsewhere.

**Eugene:** "power over reader identification", "the degree to which I have access to the tools of narrative voice". They affect the experience of reading the screenplay, not the production—e.g., 'interior warehouse. Day.' can also mention smells, but that won't reach the audience. A screenplay is an instruction manual for creating an artwork for an audience. It might mention a character's motivation and assess their psychology, because the actor needs to know enough about them to portray them. This wouldn't work in prose. Also, in prose there's no equivalent to the "silent panel" or "action without dialogue", because *everything is made of words*.

**Jesse:** in games, you can take control away from the player and then give it back. No equivalent in other media.

**Ada:** in LARPs, some actions are pre-scripted and some aren't. (In her 'Papal Election' LARP, players often tell her they feel out of the loop. 'Of course you do—there's 26 plots and you're only in 5.')

**Ada:** in visual media, you can have details whose importance is not immediately obvious, because they're in the background. In text, everything that's present has to be mentioned. This is why most successful time loop stories are in visual media: the audience notices details before the looping character does. You can show stuff instantly instead of pausing to describe: "Having things be blurry in your peripheral vision is very difficult in prose."

**Andrew:** In Jason Shiga's *Meanwhile*, sort of a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure (CYOA) graphic novel, you get important information about your choice from which panels are closest.

**Ada:** in *The Tempest*, Ariel is onstage, silently observing for 90% of it. Live productions can have Ariel subtly in the background, filmed versions have to focus on the actors speaking their lines. Prose needs even more to describe this. **Michèle** compares Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" to its movie *Arrival*. In the movie, the main character doesn't seem to age. The reveal in the movie (it's not a flashback, it's a flashforward), couldn't be done in prose: it needs the language of film editing.

**Audience:** is blurb-writing adaptation? Capsule synopsis of a TV show? Catalogue description of a class?

(The original blurb for Jo's *My Real Children* spoiled the entire thing, down to the last sentence of the last page.)

**Andrew** mentions Diane Duane's *Star Trek* novel *The Wounded Sky*, whose blurb includes "Kirk meets a beautiful alien scientist" but doesn't mention that she's a giant glass spider.

**Eugene:** CYOA wouldn't work if it was just 'click link'. Cites *Inside UFO 54-40* where the utopia page is deliberately unreachable. Comparison with Carmen Machado's CYOA memoir, where the unreachable page is "the perfect thing to say to stop the abuse".

## 6: Using Fiction to Change the World

Alexis Shotwell (M), Naomi Kritzer ("I'm the writer who caused the pandemic!"), Su Sokol ("I invented bicycles and fleeing the US for political asylum!"), Will Alexander ("I invented goblins and how masks work!")

Some books were written in worlds that don't exist any more, because those books were written. E.g., *Left Hand of Darkness* no longer feels revelatory because of how much it changed the idea of what can be shown. Other books change the world in more ways than that (e.g., *LHoD* gave a lot of people new ideas about their gender).

**Naomi:** Tolkien didn't invent fantasy, but he fundamentally changed it.

**Will:** one thing with huge ripple effects was figuring out how to make modernist 20th-century novels talk to ancient saga ideas. "Compare *Lord of the Rings* and *Ulysses*. Tolkien and Joyce would have loathed each other! It'd be an amazing cage match!" *LotR* is full of anachronisms (hobbits have umbrellas and post offices!) "How do you still talk to the past, after the massive changes of the twentieth century," a past that we barely understand, because of how much has changed. "Here's a hobbit trying to talk to someone out of *Beowulf*."

**Su** wrote Le Guin a fan letter: "You taught me that I can have social imagination," which Le Guin thought was interesting phrasing.

**Will,** re: the Torment Nexus: "never write a cautionary tale. Just don't. They'll do the thing."

**Naomi:** "Note the word 'Orwellian.'"

**Su:** SF writers don't write about the future, they write about the present. They just notice where it's going.

**Will:** MT Anderson periodically apologizes for having written *Feed*, with its social media implants.

**Naomi:** *Half-Built Garden* (Ruthanna) is post-'Dandelion Revolution' and feels reachable in a way many utopias don't.

**Alexis:** the AI in Naomi's "Cat Pictures Please" doesn't turn evil.

**Naomi:** "Better Living Through Algorithms" was an attempt to not write the Torment Nexus, because if you use it as a model, it can only improve lives. **Will** mentioned 2020—how a lot of people couldn't read, or could only *re-read*.

**Naomi** had a June 2020 deadline for the second *Catnet* book, and had to do huge rewrites. "We live in the version of the world where we have an actual pandemic." She'd given it in earlier, and in February had received editorial notes. And by April she had finally started work on it again (because March was just not workable). And the book is set in Minneapolis. And then George Floyd was murdered. And she had to rewrite it *again*. "I don't know how to write Minneapolis any more because I don't know what it will look like any more." A friend told her: "Write the Minneapolis you want to see."

**Su:** stories need something to not be perfect.

**Naomi:** "I want the people in the future to have a good future!"

**Su:** Utopias and dystopias try to do the same thing: show the need for social change. 'Here's a dangerous trend', 'here's what we could do instead'.

**Will:** the difference between analyzing an idea and dramatizing it. "It's a totality of dramatic experience where I'm sufficiently intrigued by the idea unfolding that I feel it. That's what makes it seem possible. (...) Hey, wouldn't it be cool if we structured society like this? Okay!"

**Naomi:** different stories may be "wouldn't it be cool if" or "wouldn't it suck if"—and it's not always clear which is which. E.g., Sheri Tepper's *Gate to Women's Country*, which Tepper clearly thought was a utopia.

**Su** doesn't like "big idea" books if they don't have interesting characters or plot.

**Naomi:** Life is too short to read books that don't interest you. Just check the Wikipedia article.

**Will:** Political content in fiction is like salt in ice cream: necessary. Like the initial premise in an improv skit, and then character takes over. "Understanding is story-shaped." Story has to come first, because there's nothing else. We don't understand anything storyless. Scientific theories are stories about the nonsense we observe.

**Su:** some people complain about books being too political. Everything is political; if you don't notice, that's because it's the status quo. Which is political.

**Naomi:** some books overdo it, though.

**Su:** "or are they just badly written?"

**Alexis** points out Steven Brust made collectivism metaphysically impossible in the *Dragaera* books even though he himself is a Trotskyist.

**Audience questions:** Jon Singer—if story is key to our comprehension, could there be entities that interpret the world in non-story ways? What would that be like? (“Write that!” “What about Latro with no long-term memory?” “What about the Skroderiders from *A Fire Upon the Deep*?”) Cenk Gokce comments on *LHoD*: not having gender pronouns in your first language (his is Turkish) doesn’t mean you can’t tell the difference! You can be very sexist in Turkish without pronouns. (Also, he was too young when he read it, and probably missed the sex stuff.) (**Will:** Sapir-Whorf? Cenk: Sapir-Whorf doesn’t work.)

**Naomi:** I yelled at someone for mansplaining in 1994, but it took a lot more words to explain.

**Will:** *LHoD* screwed me up too, because Spanish (his first language) genders *everything*. (**Audience:** ‘at least it’s not German, with *three* genders!’)

**7: BOOK CLUB: *Norstrilia*, by Cordwainer Smith.** Hosted by Emmet O’Brien.

I participated extensively, and thus didn’t take notes. Two particular details I remember: 1) I misinterpreted the ending of “The Crime and the Glory of Commander Suzdahl” because I hadn’t realized that the Instrumentality is a slave state, and 2) one of the participants, who is a parent of three-year-old twins, said that the ending of *Norstrilia* reads very differently now than when they read it years ago.

**8: Training montages, infodumps, and other stuff we’re not supposed to like but do anyway.**

Mal Frasier, Gretchen McCulloch, Alison Sinclair, Shaz Taslimi, Jo Walton (M)

The panel was originally a **Jo/Gretchen** joke, but then **Jo** realized “I *like* a good training montage! ... Don’t do this sort of infodump unless you’re Neal Stephenson.”

What **Gretchen** likes: watching characters do ‘logistics porn.’ Vicarious accomplishment. Characters who are really good at their jobs, where all the pieces come together nicely and all the setbacks are educational. **Jo** likes the “using only what’s in this box” scene from *Apollo 13* (everyone nods approvingly), and lists of things you have on a desert island.

**Mal** distinguishes between ‘doing the thing’ and ‘fixing the spaceship with the stuff’. Compares to *Legends and Lattes*. Very much dislikes when the problem, the setbacks, and the solution are all artificial. She likes clever stuff reflective of the real world. Cites Cory Doctorow—‘here’s 12 pages about the history of semiconductors!’—we’re not supposed to like that.

**Jo:** Nora Roberts’ book about fixing up a B&B (with a ghost)—the details seem plausible to her. Conversely, in another novel, “woman who’s never baked before is able to, in a new kitchen, provide restaurant-quality food”—bullshit.

**Gretchen:** the joy of reading something you know nothing about, vs something you know deeply and can nitpick.

**Mal:** in mystery novels, the detective walks us through the puzzle and we’re just along for the ride. “Make me feel that the characters are intelligent.”

**Shaz** mentions Nathan Lowell’s *Quartershare*, where a guy drinks coffee, reads engineering manuals, and figures out how to use a spaceship. It’s very readable, but is it entertaining? **Jo** thought it was fun “but I wouldn’t say it was good”.

**Alison:** you need *stakes* for a training montage. There has to be a reason, it has to be done under pressure. The setbacks have to matter to the characters.

**Gretchen** on the Lowell—‘formulaicness’. Comfort reading: linear plots with no flashbacks and one POV character and *simple worldbuilding without tons of extra details to assimilate*.

**Jo** used to work in a bookstore and people would ask for “the new X”, like it was cereal. They want it to be just like the old X. You could make a career from that, although **Jo** would get very bored, which is why she’s only read 7 Nora Roberts books. This resonates with **Shaz**—“read the first two books, then I know exactly what this is and if I’m ever in the mood I’ll finish it.” **Jo:** ‘books for a wet Sunday when you have a cold’ (or, in 2020, when she was in a slump and read her entire backlog). Mentioned E. C. Tubb’s *Dumarest* books—“If you want to read these, read #4 and #17. But don’t. (...) Every one of these books contains the same paragraph explaining how the FTL works. This was pre-word-processing. Whenever teenage **Jo** would find the FTL infodump, she’d get this little warm glow of recognition.”

**Gretchen:** perverse sense of second-order enjoyment to read about something done badly.

**Mal:** romance novels!

**Gretchen:** no one behaves this way!

**Mal:** I love a horrible sex scene!

(**Greer:** SPEAKING OF TRAINING MONTAGES!)

**Mal** compares sex scenes to tattoos: rare to see good ones, boring to see mediocre ones, very funny to see horrible ones. **Gretchen** compares them to fight scenes. **Jo:** anatomy with supposedly emotional superlatives. Just not interesting. **Mal:** it’s like scenes of people doing magic, or making cookies. Fun to watch—or *supposed* to be. If you’re not interested, bleh.

**Jo:** “Magic is supposed to be numinous. Magic scenes should evoke awe.”

**Mal:** if it’s characters in magic school learning, it’s not numinous. There’s a difference between books where magic is something you *do*, and where it’s something that *happens*.

**Mal** mentions “fight scenes that feel like a good puzzle”, where you don’t know what the outcome will be. **Jo:** having the right stakes is difficult. You have to believe in the danger to make the fight remotely interesting. ‘Start with action’ is terrible advice if you don’t care about the characters... “the world is going to be destroyed? On page 1? I don’t know your characters, but I *have* read books before.”

**Mal:** What makes a good training montage is the possibility that it might fail and the book could go in another direction. E.g., Miles Vorkosigan not getting into military academy.

**Jo** knew someone who just assumed that Miles would get into the academy and be promoted to captain and win the girl (“you’re thinking of David Weber!”), and thus didn’t want to read past the first few chapters of *The Warrior’s Apprentice*.

**Mal:** very rarely do you actually get accurate training for what you do in life!

**Jo** notes training montages and heists with really complex things happening, and you’re trying to figure out what’s the answer. “I don’t mind if it’s formulaic, but I hate if it’s stupid.”

**Mal:** or when they pull magic out of nowhere.

**Jo:** or do it on Mars.

**Gretchen** compares sex and fight scenes again—imagine a romance with the sex scene in the first chapter before you know who the characters are. Or a fight where you don't know who's doing what. **Jo** complains about pop histories that start *in medias res* then jump back to the beginning. “Here I am, Savonarola, about to be burned alive. *RECORD SCRATCH* I bet you're wondering how I got here!” (**Mal** thanks her for not doing that with *Lent*.)

In a long series (e.g., Cherrry's *Foreigner*), you eventually stop believing the characters are in danger. “I know you're not gonna hurt them—less fight scenes, more furniture shopping.”

**Mal**: sometimes it's nice to spend time with characters *after* their Bad Adventure, when they're sitting in a Sharing Circle and talking about trauma.

**Audience**: what makes a good *long* infodump?

**Alison**: good writing. Poetry.

**Mal**: Cory Doctorow doesn't start his plots until halfway through the book, and it works.

**Jo**: Good infodumps are like good non-fiction, which is a genre of its own.

**Gretchen**: Conversation—someone might be telling you about their car and boring you, or about planets and fascinating you. An annoying infodump feels shoehorned in and isn't interesting or integral to the plot.

**Audience**: Don't write what you don't know too well, or you'll screw it up for people who do.

**Grace**: the best anti-infodump is Brunner's *The Infinitive of Go*.

**Jo**: “you don't need to know these details. Moving on.”

**Mal**: Digressions are like infodumps. If I trust the author, I'll follow them wherever.

**Audience**: not just expertise, but *enthusiasm*. E.g., Robin McKinley believably enjoys training dogs and horses, Melville will spend 5 pages on “whales are fish” and you'll enjoy it even though it's wrong.

**Jo**: other than infodumps, you can use in-cluing (a word she invented). E.g., instead of saying “we use food replicators”, have someone complain that the food replicator is broken and keeps spitting out croissants and why isn't the replicator repairman here yet. Or Delaney's example—“the red sun was high, the blue sun was low”. Bad writer: “we were on a planet of a binary star”, good writer: “purple shadows”.

**Audience**: do infodumps have to be third-person?

**Mal**: two characters telling each other about political economy.

**Jo**: the way to make “As you know, Bob” work is to have Bob say “for god's sake, shut up.”

**Mal**: use false documents! “Newspaper clippings”! That's how they work in real life.

**Gretchen** hates when the author apologizes for being boring—then why are you telling it to us! Just do it, don't apologize!

**Jo**: unless it's worldbuilding, like in *Tooth and Claw* where she apologized every time she mentioned cooked meat (but not cannibalism, which was fine).

**Mal**: We don't need an explanation of Why There Was Only One Bed. We want to know what happens next.

**Jo**: what happens next is we break for dinner.

**9: CONCERT: SASSAFRASS** (Ada Palmer, Lauren Schiller, and Michael Mellas). **Ada** mixed the concert (my favorite song was “Hearthfire”, the first one) with a lecture on Norse mythology, where she explained the concepts involved.

“The Viking cosmos we have to work with today is much

more impressive than what we had to work with in the mid-20th century. Nazism poisoned Viking studies for decades. For about 25 years after WW2, all papers on Vikings were ‘we measured this building’. You couldn't do serious Viking cultural research without citing a top Viking scholar... who was a Nazi culture minister. (...)

A grudge match between the archaeological department in Oxford and the literary department: the people who dug up Viking sites refused to read the old sagas, and the people who read the old sagas refused to look at the findings from the sites. (...)

In Norse myth, the theodicy is upside down. Given that the world is fundamentally deadly and uninhabitable, why is there good? How is there anything, how did we learn to survive in the first place since it requires so many steps?”

**10: Victoria Goddard**, interviewed by Alexis Shotwell.

Victoria is fascinated by the idea that you can live in one place for a long time: as a kid, she moved around a lot (parents' jobs). She's been in one place for 6 years now, the longest she's ever done it, and there are all these new lessons—“oh, you have to renew library cards? Decluttering doesn't just happen?” Once she walked across England, an old country whose landscape was built at a walking pace. Going down the Northumberland coastline, every day there's a different castle (which is the *point*).

The fascination with “being from somewhere”, which she doesn't have. Becoming more aware of the tension re: being from the ‘settler contingent’—when she was in the UK and they saw her as ‘from Canada.’ “How can I be from a place that I'm not attached to? I'll always be a Come From Away.” That desire to come from a place, to put yourself somewhere. In fantasy, you can explore the magic of that.

Friendship is a very important theme in her novels. Was afraid of writing the same story—‘people becoming friends’—too often, then realized that as a romance novelist she kept writing “people falling in love”.

Why are fantasy protagonists so often orphans or single? If you have nobody, then you can go off for fairyland without leaving anyone behind. Years ago, her father said that if she found the portal to fairyland, she should leave. But in 2006 her sister died, so now she could never leave her parents behind like that.

Many of her works explore friendships across power gulfs. It's a real thing that happens—friendships across power dynamics. But it's also a metaphor for how people are different. If this person has a significant amount of political—or magical—power over you, how can they know whether it's a genuine friendship?

Fantasy lets you pick and choose the elements that you want to focus on—the type of power dynamic that you want to magnify. That kind of power dynamic doesn't always exist in the real world. Ethics of power—if they have that type of power, are they capable of real relationships? Does power corrupt? You never can really reach across, but you want to. “The most constrained person in a tyranny is the tyrant. It comes into the story because Cliopher [viewpoint character of her *Hands of the Emperor*] cares more about politics than I do.”

How do we represent power in SF&F—“this emperor is magically necessary to the world, his gaze will *actually* burn you”. Witchburning in a setting where the witches have actually sold their souls to the powers of evil... is a problem.

Even in *Hands of the Emperor*, where the Emperor is divine, that's not necessarily good. If magic is a real thing, how can we distribute it? What if it's only available to certain people? What if

it can only *ever* be available to certain people? How can we reduce injustice?

She met someone who had also written a book about UBI [Universal Basic Income, a plot point in *HotE*], and his scheme seemed actually workable, and he asked her “how do you do it in your book,” and she said “uh, magic.”

*HotE* started off as a vignette of the Emperor from the perspective of his secretary, and then Cliopher totally took over the book. 900 PAGES LATER... it was essentially her guilty pleasure book that she'd write when procrastinating from other stuff. “It didn't feel like a story, it was a narration. This meandering thing.” UBI was a logical thing for Cliopher to think about. “It was supposed to be a world that was a little bit better governed than this one—not a wild utopia, just a little better.”

She's been working on her Nine Worlds stuff since she was a teenager. A vague general sense of what the worlds are like, and whenever she writes about one of them, she learns more about it. *HotE* was specifically intended to be non-European. Everything else followed from there. Fantasy lets you think about colonialism without, e.g., racial markers. Having a large empire that has now collapsed lets you think about things in different ways.

One thing about fantasy—fiction in general—is that you get to make a happier story if you want to. “I'm not a grimdark writer. I can write people solving their problems.”

Fantasy has the idea of the Just King (per Tolkien). Many readers have said that's the hardest thing to believe about *HotE*: “Cliopher actually got his bureaucratic reforms through.” A real bureaucrat contacted her with some quibbles, which she'll use in the next book.

“Magic is fundamentally mysterious. Some things will always be mysterious, and I like that. When I think about religion and magic, I like taking it seriously, but knowing that magic has the ability to cross over into the mythic does affect some of those things.”

**Audience:** I'm fascinated by how Cliopher becomes a “mythically good bureaucrat”—what about the transition process between levels of reality and myth?

Victoria likes writing magic happening—lyrical explanations and descriptions. It's like power dynamics in relationships—a concretization of what's happening. Some places just feel numinous or holy—a random church or crossroads. “If the faerie queen showed up here, I would not be surprised. There, yes. Here, no.” Exploring that as a real thing that happens instead of a metaphorical one. “You are now untouchable—what does that mean? You may have all the power in the world—does that give you power over yourself?”

**Audience:** we should have more tall tales about government and bureaucracy. “The day Cliopher walked into the EPA and got all the forms signed.” “They called him to testify before Congress, and everyone said, Wow, you're right!”

Someone once asked Victoria how she got UBI approved in her book. “Uh, the god-emperor agreed to it.”

She has several novels in progress. There will eventually be another Cliopher novel, but they're long books and take a lot of percolating and other stuff has to happen first. She's “character-forward”: has ideas well in advance of where the story is, and eventually she catches up with one of them and writes it. She's had some books that she's wanted to write since she was 16 but needs to fill in the backstory first.

**Audience:** How can you tell when the story is done?

“Sometimes I'm sick of them and start another one.” She usually has an idea of the shape of the story, the general feel of the denouement, the emotional end note. With a series book, it can be hard to know where X stops and Y and Z begins. “It just feels finished.”

### 11: Imaginary Books.

Greer Gilman (“I write imaginary books”), Mal Frasier (“I work at Tor, I edit books that will be real in two years”), Lila Garrott (“I write, and I encounter books that seem to be imaginary”), Yves Menard (“I like to imagine books within books”), Jo Walton (M).

**Greer** mentions John Donne's 17th-century “Courtiers' Library”—list of fake books with amazing titles that you can be disappointed in your peers for not having read. **Jo:** delightful, but a joke—not the point. **Mal** has a category system: first, books that pretend to be books in their own universe (e.g., *Terra Ignota*, *Princess Bride*); second, books that are created in the universe of other books (e.g., “Where's My Cow”, *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*); third, imaginary books within other books (she distinguishes ‘imaginary for now’ from ‘stay imaginary’, but...?)

**Greer** mentions books you find in dreams. **Jo:** it's such a common dream, being in a used bookstore and finding a rare book, but it's never on lists of common dreams! Everyone here has that, yes? **Mal:** I think there's some selection bias with this audience.

**Yves** likes books that give a glimpse into a larger, vaster world for the reader to imagine. Mention ‘the Imp of Nozworld’ – who's that? You as author don't have to know.

**Jo:** in the real world, characters can quote from real literature. In the future or a fantasyland, they can't; you have to make it up for them.

**Mal:** plus, the titles are great worldbuilding themselves, as are the types of books that get excerpted.

**Lila:** plus you don't have to hunt down the citations.

**Yves:** or clear the quotes.

**Jo:** *Encyclopedia Galactica* is out of copyright.

**Greer** likes magical books, like “The Architecture of Country Houses” (from *Little, Big*) which has an infinitely unfolding map insert.

**Jo:** Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* novels, where you can tell the difference between the story and the ‘fanfic’.

**Lila** likes books where you can deduce the contents from the rest of the text—a play where the characters are making a terrible play and you can figure out what the plot is and it's terrible.

**Yves:** the Necronomicon! **Jo:** There's multiple mutually exclusive versions.

**Mal:** books that were supposed to be in a series but then the author died.

**Jo** has written April 1 reviews of imaginary books (how does *The Last Dangerous Visions* hold up after all these years? Kenneth Branagh's movie of Shakespeare's *Arthur*—pretending the reader knows the plot and has opinions on casting choices). **Mal:** “Captain America at 100”, a fanfic reviewing the Captain America movies in a world where he was a real person. **Jo:** Stanislaw Lem had two whole books of imaginary reviews! **Mal:** *Goncharov*! **Jo:** “I saw that!” If she were writing something set in that era, she'd have characters who saw *Goncharov* just so she could add to the mythology.

**Lila:** Books that the author intends to write, and tells you about, but never gets around to writing.

**Greer:** Damn these people from Porlock!

**Audience:** *WINDS OF WINTER!*

**Yves:** Iain Banks had a character who wanted to write a book where the Kaaba was an alien artifact and everyone told him not to. Probably Banks wrote that novel and got told 'NO', so he gave it to a character.

**Jo:** Pat Wrede has a bookshelf mural in her office. When you visit her, she asks you to paint in a book you will never write. "It is surprisingly difficult to promise that you will never write this book."

**Mal:** books she read as submissions that go unpublished. Very, very good, but not commercially viable. They live rent-free in her head and she can *never talk about them*.

**Jo:** Samuel Delaney's *Voyage, Orestes*: several publishers rejected it, then the original got lost and the backup got burned in a fire. One publisher wanted to publish it in the 60s but couldn't, and in the 80s contacted Delaney about it but it was too late. A fragment exists and has been published; **Jo** hasn't read it and isn't sure she wants to, because it's been imaginary in her head for so long.

**Mal:** Christopher Pike's *Alosha* series, where #3 had an ad for #4, which was never published. Tor had the manuscript once, but by the time she started working there it was gone. **Jo:** "unpublished Book #4" is the saddest kind. She tries not to imagine sequels to books she likes, because she's too good at seeing plot beats and spoiling herself. She's done a mental version of Delaney's *The Splendor and Misery of Bodies, of Cities* because Delaney never will. Even if he does, it won't be her version.

**Audience:** *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler!* (about chapters plucked from imaginary books)

**Jo:** the "books" in it couldn't be as good as their sample chapters.

**Gretchen:** the imaginary intermediates—you go to a library, they have books #1 and #7, and you have to interpolate what the others are like.

**Greer:** the "original" versions of the childhood books you carry in your head—you go back to them afterward and they're not as good.

**Jo:** They were visited by the Suck Fairy. Sometimes you expect the Suck Fairy to have been there and the books are actually better. Great thing about the Suck Fairy is, you can pretend it's the book that changed, not you.

**Lila:** "That's what imaginary books are *for*."

**Yves:** as a kid he'd read lists of published titles and just imagine them.

**Jo** did that too: Penguin UK would purchase an award-winning book by a US author and then publish it in the UK with a list of all the author's other books... which they would not publish (because not award-winning), but would also block anyone else from publishing. For 35 years she wanted to read *Beyond the Tomorrow Mountains* and no real book could live up to the version in her head.

**Audience:** have you ever quoted books you sort of intend to write but know you won't?

At 15, **Jo** wrote a time-travel Plato's Republic story and called it "Thessaly". It was not good. When she wrote *Among Others*, which is semi-autobio, she gave it to "Mor—the 15-year-old me" to write. And then she forgot she'd done that. So when she wrote the *Thessaly* books some years later, several people were "... what?!?"—good thing she didn't put it on Pat Wrede's wall.

## 12: Making Up Names for People and Places

Greer Gilman, Ruthanna Emrys ("I've written several books that have people with names and places with names"), Gretchen McCulloch (M), Jesse Scoble, Sherwood Smith

**Sherwood:** naming conventions are part of the worldbuilding. Not just the language, but how the people interact with each other. As a kid, it bugged her that the elves in LOTR all had euphonious names and were good and the orcs all had GRASHNAK\* names and were bad—was tempted to write a story where heroes had GRASHNAK names.

**Ruthanna** uses baby name lists, but also wants names that don't exist. "When naming characters from Innsmouth who are longlived and amphibious and isolated, I looked at the original names from Lovecraft—they were Puritan names, so I went with that"—the much older ones have proto-African names, the ones who are several thousand years old have Latinate names—another cohort have anglophone names and haven't yet caught up with the 1940s. Mentions the generational cycle: "that's a great name / that's a mom name / that's a grandma name / that's a great-grandma name / I've never heard of anyone with that name, it's great".

**Gretchen:** too many Michaels and Matthews!

**Jesse** had a class with 4 Jennifers.

**Sherwood:** "I was a teacher, the Year of the Ashleys." 'Samantha' was a comic name, a slave name, until it was used in some very successful fiction.

**Gretchen:** 'Victoria' used to be a super weird and rare name, then she was queen for decades and it became normal. She wasn't supposed to be in line for the throne so her parents gave her a weird name instead of a royally appropriate one, and she chose to keep it as her regnal name.

**Ruthanna:** compare *The Goblin Emperor*, where Maya chooses a regnal name to reject his father's policies and people are horrified.

**Greer:** there are classes of names—her novel with a family whose daughters are "Bet" and "Deb", and whose sons are "Dagobert" and "Arcimbold".

**Gretchen:** the idea that characters have given names and family names.

**Greer:** how long have people in this culture had family names? Did they choose them or were they forced to?

**Sherwood:** Do you name children after living people or dead ones? Is it scary to name a child after her living mother? Do you choose the name before birth? How easy is it for the child to change their name? Do you give the child a name like "Pigface" until they're old enough to repel demons on their own?

**Gretchen:** what about names that are less than apt?

**Greer:** the wizard Alanon (from *Wizard of Shanmara*, written at a time when it was very hard to research names).

**Ruthanna:** worst thing is you invent a great name and then it gets re-used by something else.

**Gretchen:** the wizard Siri!

**Greer** read a novel once and checked the glossary (because she's Greer) and found that the culture named their noontime meal "midden", oops. **Jesse** once worked on a game that needed a name; they hired a brainstorming agency that gave them nothing useful; his francophone boss suggested "<English obscenity>". Direct quote: "you can't have 'the wizard Penis.'" **Ruthanna** wrote vignettes to illustrate powers in an RPG—"I couldn't convince the guy in charge it would be a bad idea to call the game UNWANTED. Google 'unwanted game' will not show you this game!"

**Gretchen:** or names that *almost* work?

**Sherwood:** I was a kid, I was writing for other kids, 'bugger' sounded really cool!

**Greer** mentions Eleanor Cameron naming a doll "Felony".

**Audience:** Guy Kay's wizard mentor "Aileron"! Lin Carter's "Thongor,



Lord of the Virion”! (Does he wear a thong? ... possibly, the books had Frazetta covers.)

**Jo:** Vance’s *Servants of the Wankh*—when she saw them on a shelf in the UK in the 80s, she got the wrong idea, and thus has never read Vance.

**Ruthanna:** comedic names—e.g., *Bored of the Rings* with “Dildo Bigger”. You read this for several pages, it gets old fast—but “Anathema Device” (from *Good Omens*) doesn’t.

**Gretchen:** other categories of names? Vessels? Places?

**Sherwood:** ship names are so random nowadays—famous battles, famous people, famous other boats, famous words, unfortunate boasts.

**Ruthanna’s** favorite thing about Banks’ *Culture* novels is the ship names. In her *Half-Built Garden*, the aliens use molecular diagrams for names, because they communicate through smell (after diagrams: astronomy, geography, bureaucracy).

**Sherwood:** names that are in-jokes. She’s named several villains after one particular ex-boss; they all die horribly, what a coincidence!

If you’re translating Tolkien, do you translate the names? Remember, “Merry” and “Pippin” are supposed to be translations already. **Sherwood** mentions Chinese cultural naming conventions. In **Ruthanna’s** *Wintertide*, which pulls directly from Lovecraft, she had to mention ‘the Tsan Chan Empire’—but Lovecraft didn’t care about getting the Chinese right. She had to consult with her editor’s Chinese-American wife to translate it into something sensical (plus, transliteration has changed over the past century, plus it’s for something 5,000 years in the future).

**Gretchen:** names also have to be rendered in the alphabet we have access to, which is irregular. Quotes an editor friend who says “the main use of my linguistics degree is making these pronunciation guides internally consistent!”

**Ruthanna** grew up pre-audiobook... in a genre with ‘languages unpronounceable by humans’.

**Gretchen:** ‘Dramatic Personae’—presenting all the names before you start the plot. Does that invite or repulse the reader?

**Greer:** consider the reader like the audience of a play—people digging through their programs in realtime to identify the characters. “Tolkien gave me a taste for appendices.”

**Ruthanna** feels obligated to read them first, otherwise it’s like being introduced to people with no nametags. **Jesse** prefers them as an appendix.

\* *I don’t remember if “GRASHNAK” was something Sherwood said, or if I just used it as shorthand for ‘harsh noise’.*

### 13: Dante Alighieri as SF Writer.

Victoria Goddard, Thomas Noriega, ari dorsey, Ada Palmer, Jo Walton

**Ada:** *The Divine Comedy* is about a world we can never know, so it’s speculative.

**Jo:** Dante was using the best physics he had available at the time—like how gravity is dependent on sin.

**Ada:** *TDC* is pre-Descartes, so Hell was in the same reality as us—if you dig, you can get there. You *can’t* dig unless Fate lets you, but Hell is part of the world. Satan’s in the universe, the farthest from God: morally superior goes up, inferior goes down. Post-Milton, we imagine souls being judged—in Dante, you arrive, you confess your sins, you sink to your level (levels of Hell are separate like in salad

dressing). It’s about the state of your soul at the moment of death: think about God/Heaven/etc, your soul will have an upward vector. If you’re thinking about earthly things, your soul will sink. The souls in Limbo aren’t *bad*, they just don’t *float*.

Remember how Hamlet won’t kill Claudius during prayer? The idea that salvation depends on the last few seconds of your thoughts is alien to modern Christianity, but clear to people of that era. Shakespeare knew his audiences cared. That’s why his dying characters have a short speech, so we know where they’re going. (e.g., in *Henry VI*, two dying characters say “God have mercy on my soul” so we know they’re going to heaven. Sometimes Shakespeare had villains *not* say this, so we’d know they’re going to Hell.)

**Victoria:** the blurred lines between literal and metaphorical. Dante as writer and as character—apocryphally, some people believed he had actually gone to Hell.

**ari:** Dante said there were 4 truths: literal, historical, moral, theological (his sons backtracked on this *hard*), and that’s how you’re supposed to read the poem. The literal truth of what’s happening on the page, and the hidden meaning—it’s how people read the Bible, it’s how Dante wanted us to read *TDC*, and it’s how we read SF. Tolkien hated the idea of 1:1 correspondences – if Sauron is *just* Hitler, it lessens the meaning. Sauron is Hitler, but also ‘having to fight in World War One’, but also ‘your depression’, but also ‘a literal fallen angel’.

**Victoria:** when Dante meets Virgil, it follows the rules of a ghost story: the ghost doesn’t speak until spoken to. Why Virgil, though? He was a poet who’d written about going into the underworld—at one level, this is clearly about the impact that reading a book can have on you. Dante was obsessed with Virgil.

**ari:** sometimes we talk about books being ‘in conversation’ with other books; Dante just literalized the idea: “I talked to Virgil’s ghost in Hell, and he said if you want to know X, it’s in my book, so learn to read.”

**Thomas:** it’s a self-insert fanfic.

**Jo:** it was a bestseller—even illiterate people heard it being read aloud. There were people for whom Dante was a new book. Eventually it became a revered book. Boccaccio set up a reading group, where they’d read one canto a week and then discuss it; people have been reading it ever since.

**ari:** Benvenuto da Imola’s commentary on Dante said Purgatory doesn’t exist—we went to the southern hemisphere, it’s not there.

**Victoria:** *TDC* gave us the concept of the Inferno, but there’s more to the book than that. It’s like reading Shakespeare and realizing oh, that’s where the quotes come from. When she read the bit where Dante goes up the mountain and finds Paradise, and it’s empty, she realized “this is Aslan’s Country from *The Silver Chair*”. It’s magical to find the original source like that.

**Ada:** one thing Dante has more in common with SF writers than many of his contemporaries: he thinks through the physicality of his imagined space in much more detail. Virgil’s underworld is very lightly rendered. People like drawing maps of Dante’s world, but not of the Iliad or Aeneid other than just “the Mediterranean”—who cares where a particular incident took place? Not enough description to give them a real physicality. Dante thought it through to the same degree that Tolkien did, and that modern SF writers do.

**Victoria:** the sense of time passing. It’s in settings where time is indefinite, but you have a feeling for when things happen. In Florence there are plaques pointing out specific locations from Dante: “Scene X happened here”.

**Ada:** you can see Dante calculating—if I walked this much time, and it was this wide, then I’d get *here*. It’s like what SF writers do with

fractions of lightspeed.

**Jo** compares to Lucian of Samosata, which she feels is not SF, because it doesn't do that. Lucian has a war between the Moon and the Sun, but they might as well just be magic islands. They build a bridge between them, but Lucian doesn't go into detail about the bridge! Dante would fuss about whether you could see the bridge from Earth.

**Thomas:** he'd fuss about angular momentum, and what it means that the Moon society is entirely male.

**ari:** it's about plot structure. If the universe is providential and God has a plan for everything, then you can tell narratives that make more sense, rather than 'shit just happens sometimes.' For Dante to have prophecies referring to events that already happened at the time he wrote, but not at the time the book was set, is like foreshadowing. You can't do that in the real world, unless you have providential fate. This lets him construct *TDC* like a story, because it *is* a story. It's what lets him know he will be exiled. When it is set, he is having a successful career as a politician and poet and has no reason to think any of this will change. *Surprise!* The story fictionalizes his own emotional journey of "I've been exiled and it sucks." You can only do this when you're setting something in the past of your own world in a universe with providence.

**Ada:** Dante solves the problem of "I wanna show you this cool worldbuilding"—it's like 20th-century utopian novels where you get to the utopia and everyone wants to explain how public transit works. The problem that authors have when they do tons of worldbuilding: I want you to see all this stuff. There needs to be a plot and characters, and I need to decide what happens to them... structural elements which modern SF writers deal with. Homer and Virgil didn't. They were more plot than tour. When Homer sends Odysseus on the trip through the islands, each island has a story. Dante's thought process as a writer resembles what writers go through now.

**Jo:** We can't clearly distinguish the things that Dante made up, from the things that were generally believed at the time. How much of it is his worldbuilding?

**Ada:** pre-*Commedia*, a painting of the Last Judgement would have a central devil tormenting people, maybe in a way that reflects their sin, but they'd all be jumbled together. Post-Dante, these paintings would sort sinners by category. The idea that it is normal in Hell for people to be sorted by sin—that Hell has sections—is Dante's.

**Victoria:** he mentions crowd control: pedestrians going on the right side of the road. He was trying to show innovation and clarity of observation.

**Jo:** for us, it's a classic. We see it from a distance. It's hard for us to see the difference between 1316 when he wrote, and 1300 when it's set. That gap is tiny for us, but a 16-year gap from today would be enormous. Prophecies about "X will die horribly" had much more power when X had recently died horribly. Today we need to check the Reader's Notes to learn who these people were, which makes it less vivid.

**Ada:** Dante has no interest in the interiority of any nonhuman intelligence. The angels, the devils, the titans, the gorgons, nothing. That's standard of literary depictions of non-humans until "way later than you think" —e.g., Shakespeare gives no closure as to the fates of Caliban and Ariel in *The Tempest* or how they feel about anyone. Even in 19th century fairy fantasy, we don't get the interiority of elves or dwarves; they're as alien as wolves or deer. People who read Dante for the first time can be surprised that the Devil is not a character, the angels are just lights who show up and make a speech and vanish. Dante is deeply interested in the interiority of all the humans from all the eras, but the nonhumans are not beings with whom we are supposed to empathize or speculate about their thoughts.

**ari:** no angels are named except Gabriel, who stands next to Mary and says how great she is.

**Victoria:** Dante describes moving from the physical universe to the metaphysical—Earth, through the circles of the Heavens, to the Fixed Stars, to the Empyrean—then realizes it's inverted and what's furthest away is the center, and Satan at the center is way out. She saw an article that says this is basically a four-dimensional sphere.

**Audience:** thoughts on Niven-and-Pournelle's *Inferno*?

**Ada:** it's petty in just the right way. No other adaptation has shown Dante being that petty.

**Jo:** Niven and Pournelle read *Commedia* with a lot of attention. The physicality is there, as is the pettiness.

**Ada:** it's a really fun thing to read.

#### 14: Future of the Whole Planet

Will Alexander, Ruthanna Emrys, Eugene Fischer, Naomi Kritzer, Ada Palmer (M)

**Ada:** When structuring a narrative about the whole world: you need to center the reader somewhere. Someone has to see the scenes so the reader can process them.

**Will:** hint at the edges of how the broader world might have changed instead of going beyond the viewpoint character.

**Naomi** likes specificity: a sense of place that comes from the writer either knowing the place very well or being able to fake it convincingly. The increasing diversity of SF means now we have writers who come from Sri Lanka or rural Poland and give their own experience instead of everything being from New York.

**Will:** the frame of a story that affects the planet as a whole—it's easier to do with a disaster—e.g., a pandemic.

**Eugene:** non-disaster stories that try to look at the full range of global consequence, e.g., Kevin Brockmeier's *The Illumination* where pain immediately becomes light, worldwide and... that's it. We see individual characters' lives and how it affects them when there's no such thing as invisible pain.

**Ruthanna:** with a plot that affects the whole planet, remember: the future's not identical everywhere. Look at how we're having this convention with people from all over, in the middle of a pandemic and water shortages – you could build a novel from that. Global perspective can give that causal depth even if the perspective is very tight.

**Ada:** a future where the whole world is present and we haven't just thought through Future Everything. E.g., a book set in 2300 where you've figured out all the differences and the whole world is present in the foods and signs and etc, but the plot is a locked-room murder mystery.

A lot of stories depict "X that affects the whole world" via news—the consumption of news. Some is consumed by everyone simultaneously—e.g., most of us heard about COVID in the first week. So often there'll be a description of people walking in a mall and seeing TV news on television and discussing the thing that happened to the Mars expedition.

**Ruthanna:** the idea that everyone experiences the news at the same time is a very TV (radio)-era thing. In Kipling's *ABC* stories, news transmission was slowed down so as to avoid social catastrophe.

Another way to think about the future is different patterns and rhythms of how news spreads. In **Ruthanna's** first year at university (and online), there was a coup in Russia; she was on Usenet and saw reports from people who were watching Eastern European news, and getting details 15 minutes earlier than people watching CNN.

**Ada:** Reactions to news when everyone has heard it: “The masses are a danger”, vs “information is democratized”. It’s hard to depict collective action—easier to pick a hero, or at least a viewpoint character, and follow them. Mass response to a global story is easily narratizable.

**Naomi:** So many stories where the hero’s job is, get the word out! People need to know the horrible thing!, and that solves the problem because people react, or are presumed to react. The revelation is the solution. I don’t know how plausible that is any more.

**Ada:** that story tends to end at the point the news is released instead of finding out what comes next.

*Aside from news, how else can we depict global events?*

**Eugene:** psychic connections, like in *Sens8*? Some of the best linked multiple POV dancing around is in *Ancillary Justice*.

**Will:** or the event is worldwide and no one needs to be told.

**Ruthanna:** a shared space where we can quickly get the reactions of people from many different points of power and action, all yelling at each other. Imagine a central control room with a map, and lights going bright or dark. In *A Fire Upon the Deep*, even the “online” conversation slowly breaks down, showing the magnitude of the disaster.

**Will:** Going viral. Anyone can see what’s going on in public space—not like a news broadcast, but like a collapsing of distance. For reasons of cultural interest, many many people decide to be in one place for a bit. The whole world is right here, we’re all watching because we want to, not because someone else decided for us.

In *Terra Ignota*, **Ada** used expats talking about the differences they noticed in their old and new cultures, which is better than having scholars discussing the fine details. She checked Wikipedia’s list of 50 biggest cities—“do I know what’s happening in that city? Sometimes yes, and sometimes I need to figure it out.”

**Will:** Decentering. His *The House on the Moon* has space elevators, best situated at the equator—so the demographics of the solar system are mostly Spanish/Portuguese. His *Ambassador* books, where planetary ambassadors are always juveniles (juveniles are the most curious and communicate with each other best; if you want two things that would normally eat each other to be friends, introduce them when they’re young): the protagonist is American, but all previous ambassadors have been from elsewhere. Find the center and step away from it.

**Audience:** There’s no shared experience for the whole planet.

**Ada:** How do we write about it, though?

**Ruthanna:** sometimes you want to say things without implying you’re talking about the the planet where it always rains and Earth has turned into a monoculture—a failing of golden age SF where there’s one central government and one way things are run. Show that this may not be a *global* story but it takes place on a *globe*.

**Ada:** people are grateful for Character X being in a book—thrilled that their home is in the future (‘everyone always forgets Belgium exists’). Not necessarily marginalized, but underrepresented, because SF has centered certain places over time. Lately China is being more in SF than Russia, e.g., and we’re having a surge in Afrofuturist fiction.

**Ruthanna:** Have everyman characters who are not, in fact, every man. The world is not North America writ large.

**Will** inverted the racist trope of ancient aliens (“nobody could have built those pyramids themselves!”) by having a space fleet that includes Olmec descendants. Olmec statues sometimes look like they

have space helmets because aliens showed up in Olmec territory, traded, and then took immigrants (which is why some Olmec cities emptied out completely!). A spacefaring civilization that is in no way Eurocentric.

**Naomi:** the more specific something is, the more universal it is. A very specific and real location resonates beyond the group she wrote it for. E.g., Minneapolis people have argued over exactly which block her “Year Without Sunshine” takes place on.

**Eugene** wrote a story with a cult compound at a specific place in Texas that, to the best of his knowledge, had no cult compound. Someone told him “how’d you know about the cult compound? I grew up right outside the fence!”

**Will:** Maybe there wasn’t one until you wrote it!

**Eugene:** in that case, I’m changing my next novel.

**Audience:** human experience vs nonhuman? E.g., whales celebrated 9/11 because there were no planes in the sky.

**Will:** Orcas have fashion, mostly steered by adolescents. In the ’80s, young orcas wore dead salmon on their heads, then it spread to adults, and eventually went away.

**Ada:** Japanese stories where the ecosystem is what picks up that something is going wrong first. The kids and the seniors and the plants and animals know that something is wrong but the adults don’t.

**Eugene:** our lives are mundane in majority, mundanity makes things more approachable.

**Ada:** WRITING ABOUT THE GLOBAL WORLD IS GOOD.

## Movie Review: *Red One* By Josée Bellemare

As far as Christmas movies go, this one is a lot of things. It’s funny, silly, action-filled, heartwarming and has great special effects. It also has a lot of twists, turns, and surprises. This Santa, his home at the North Pole, and the people who work there are not what you might expect.

Judging by the attendance when I went to see it, *Red One* is not going to be a blockbuster in the theaters. Maybe it will do better on evenings and weekends but I think it will make its money with streaming and DVD sales.

Still, it is a fun movie so sit back, hold on to your popcorn and enjoy the ride.





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Astonishing geology and the potential to host the conditions for simple life make Jupiter's moon Europa a fascinating destination for future exploration. Beneath its icy surface, Europa is believed to conceal a global ocean of salty liquid water twice the volume of Earth's oceans. Tugging and flexing from Jupiter's gravity generates enough heat to keep the ocean from freezing. On Earth, wherever we find water, we find life. What will NASA's Europa mission find when it heads for this intriguing moon in the 2020s?