

Solar Flare

The E-Newsletter of the Friends of the Merrill Collection

Issue 1 December 2003

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ACCSFF '03: THE 2003 ACADEMIC CONFERENCE ON CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

Allan Weiss

On Wednesday, August 27, the Merrill Collection hosted the 2003 Academic Conference on Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy. I was proud to chair this event, which featured a number of interesting papers and discussions, including lively interaction between the panelists and audience members.

The highlight of the conference was the keynote address by guest speaker Margaret Atwood. She talked about her own interest in the field of fantastic literature, most notably through her reading of utopian and dystopian literature. She discussed the writing of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*; her paper was typically articulate and amusing. Atwood stressed that she writes speculative fiction, not science fiction, raising questions about genres and their definitions that I could not resist discussing in my own paper later that morning. After her talk, she answered questions from the audience.

Ms. Atwood also participated in an afternoon panel discussion chaired by Veronica Hollinger on the role of the fantastic in Canadian literature; she and the other panelists - myself, Jean-Louis Trudel and Dominick M. Grace - approached the topic from various directions. Trudel, for example, described the relationship of French-Canadian SF to outside influences such as the writings of Jules Verne, while I noted that fantastic literature has always been a part (albeit a marginal one) of the Canadian literary tradition.

After Ms. Atwood's opening remarks, we held our first session of the day, made up of three academic papers. Dianne Newell presented her research on Judith Merrill's approach to autobiography, arguing that Merrill rejected the notion that a life could be conveyed in a standard narrative approach that was strictly chronological and coherent. Kim Kofmel provided us with the results of her doctoral thesis, for which she conducted surveys of and interviews with sf readers to discover how they read the genre. My own paper dealt with the question of genre and definition in the field; no universally accepted definition of science fiction has been devised, and, indeed, the term is used in strikingly different ways in different circumstances, sometimes to describe all of fantastic literature and sometimes to refer to a very limited range of hard sf.

After lunch we returned for the panel discussion, and the participants' initial comments provoked both responses and questions from the audience. Following the panel, we held two sessions of papers, one on Canadian science fiction and one on Canadian fantasy. During the session on science fiction, Dominick Grace's paper on Phyllis Gotlieb's GalFed novels demonstrated what a classically "Canadian" empire she portrays in her fiction; Jean-Louis Trudel discussed French-Canadian utopian fiction, especially the early, agricultural utopias of the first half of the twentieth century; and Andrew M. Butler provided an overview of the fiction of Michael G. Coney, a master of creating fascinating aliens. The final session featured papers on Canada's best-known fantasists, Guy Gavriel Kay and Charles de Lint. Susan Hopkirk compared the way gods are portrayed in Guy Gavriel Kay and his major influence, J. R. R. Tolkien, while Adam Guzkowski talked about the relationship between memory, community and self in de Lint's Newford novels and stories.

The presence of Margaret Atwood, and the many interesting papers presented by scholars from Canada, Britain and the United States, made this one of the most successful and exciting ACCSFFs ever held. Thanks go out to the staff of the Merrill Collection for making the event possible, and for their hard work in ensuring that everything went smoothly. The conference illustrated quite well one of ACCSFF's main themes: the variety and importance of Canadian fantastic literature.

THE MERRIL COLLECTION OF SCIENCE FICTION
SPECULATION AND FANTASY

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THE YEAR IN REVIEW:

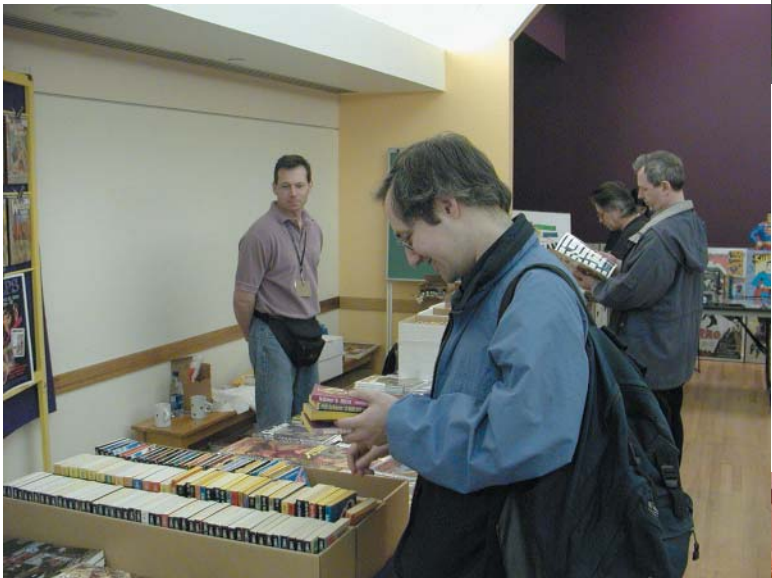
A PICTORAL LOOK AT THE MERRIL IN 2003 - ALL IMAGES COPYRIGHT 2003 BY ANDREW SPECHT



Left: In March, author Steven Brust visited the Merrill for a lively book reading, followed by a question and answer session.



Right: In support of the Pulp Show and Sale, Merrill collection staffers Annette Mocek and Kim Hull created a wonderful display of pulps devoted to memorable female heroines in the formative years of science fiction literature, entitled *Pulp Grrls!* the display ran well into the summer.



Left: In April, The 7th annual Fantastic Pulp Show and Sale brought in a large and enthusiastic crowd. With the threat of SARS looming overhead the show went on without a hitch.

Right: World renowned local author Robert J. Sawyer served as the Merrill's Writer in Residence from April to June. He is the first author to hold the position since the late Judith Merrill herself, in 1987. Response to the Writer in Residence program was so enthusiastic that a short extension of the residency was needed. After the completion of his residency, Mr. Sawyer would go on to win the Best Novel Hugo award for his novel, *Hominids* at Torcon 3 in August.



Left: In mid-August, the Merrill, along with the rest of Toronto, most of Ontario and parts of the North eastern United States, endured the Great Blackout of 2003. Fortunately, aside from some spoiled lunches in the refrigerator, the Merrill came through the ordeal unscathed.

Right: *Better to Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merrill*, won the Best Related Book Hugo at Torcon 3 in August. In September, the Merrill was presented with the Hugo for *Better to Have Loved* by Torcon 3 Chair Peter Jarvis.



Left: Robert Charles Wilson visited the Merrill for a reading in late September. Mr. Wilson read from his new novel *Blind Lake* to an enthusiastic audience.

Right: In October, Professor Elizabeth Miller gave an insightful presentation on the early drafts of Bram Stoker's classic novel *Dracula*. During the presentation, Ms. Miller presented a slideshow of Stoker's original notes.



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It's hard to believe, but around this time last year I was nervously putting the finishing touches on my first issue of *Sol Rising*. The text was edited, the digital files I had inherited from my predecessors were properly formatted, and the printer was standing by waiting for my work order. I was working feverishly to ensure the article was ready in time for the Christmas Cream Tea, where I would meet fellow Friends of the Merrill for the first time in my official capacity as editor. And that last fact alone scared me more than anything else. How would they react to me? How did I stack up to my predecessors? Did I print too many copies? Is someone going to find some embarrassing, glaring error that both my proofreaders and I missed?

As fate would have it, I had nothing to worry about. The issue was well received, the members who attended the Cream Tea felt that I was doing a good job of holding up the high standards my predecessors had set, my printing estimates were just right and there were no glaring errors. But for all the good wishes I received, I also kept getting one suggestion for improvement over and over again, and it usually went something like this:

"Sabrina, loved the issue, but I missed half the events you talked about in it though. Can you possibly publish something more often so that I can get this events calendar up to date?"

Sol Rising is published only twice a year, and six months is a long time between issues. With a few exceptions, such as Rob Sawyer's residency, our table at Worldcon, or the annual Pulp Show and Sale, most events the Merrill participates in are planned at best only two or three months in advance.

So I think it's time for me to try something a little different.

Solar Flare is the Merrill's new E-newsletter. Shorter than a regular issue of *Sol Rising*, but longer than your standard flyer, I hope to use *Solar Flare* to keep you informed on the goings on at the Merrill on a more timely basis. *Solar Flare* will publish as needed between the regular issues of *Sol Rising*, probably about three or four times a year. My plan is to publish it exclusively online, although members without the means to read it electronically may request printed copies by contacting me (see the Call for Submissions box below). And, like *Sol Rising*, all members are welcome to submit news, event announcements or articles for publication. This issue, Allan Weiss has provided me with a first hand account of The 2003 Academic Conference on Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy, and Merrill Collection photographer Andrew Specht has provide me with a disc full of photos to compile a visual year in review. We've had a busy year and a few more weeks from now we get to start all over again!

Which reminds me, I'd better finish this letter and get to work on the next *Sol Rising*.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Sol Rising and *Solar Flare* are currently accepting articles for publication. Of particular interest to the publications are articles about science, science fiction, fantasy and speculation that would be of interest to the Merrill Collection. Interested writers may contact me at sabrinafried@rogers.com for more details. Please put "The Merrill Collection of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Speculation" in your subject bar to bypass my spam filter.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Solar Flare is published electronically and printed by request only. If for any reason you require a printed version of *Solar Flare* please contact the editor at sabrinafried@rogers.com.

UPCOMING EVENTS

December 6, 2003

The annual Christmas Cream Tea will be taking place at the Merrill Collection from 1:30 to 4:30 pm. Members should check their inboxes for their invitation.

December 15-17, 2003

The Gathering of the Fellowship, a convention devoted to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, will be held at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto and other venues around the city. The convention will include a *Lord of the Rings* themed banquet and tournament at Medieval Times, and a triple feature of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies, including the extended editions of *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*. All proceeds from the Gathering of the Fellowship will be donated to ProLiteracy Worldwide's National Book Scholarship Fund, and Laubach Literacy of Canada. <http://www.tolkienegathering.com>

May 2004

The Annual General Meeting will be taking place in early May. Details will be published in the next issue of *Sol Rising*