

SFRA Country Report: The UK



Francis Gene-Rowe and Paul March-Russell

Part 1: Francis Gene-Rowe

My contribution to this column will consist of an introduction to the London Science Fiction Research Community (LSFRC), which I co-direct, followed by an overview of our 2020 activities and 2021 plans.

The LSFRC (est. 2014) is an organization of sf scholars and fans, led by a directorate of graduate students. The Community presents film screenings, work in progress colloquia, and special talks with guest speakers—whose number has included Brian Stableford, Sherryl Vint, and David Brin—several times a year, and also hosts a monthly reading group (previously located in Central London but currently online) on Monday evenings. Each year the reading group engages with texts organized around a central theme. Since 2017, we have hosted a conference centered upon our annual theme each September. The 2017 conference was entitled “Organic Systems: Environments, Bodies and Cultures,” and subsequent themes have included “Sublime Cognition: Science Fiction & Metaphysics” (2018) and “Productive Futures: The Political Economy of Science Fiction” (2019). In addition to academic keynotes, we also invite authors and other creators to participate in roundtable discussions—previous guests have included Aliette de Bodard, Gwyneth Jones, Jeff Noon, Chen Qiufan, and Larissa Sansour—as well as activists and organisers for a “provocations beyond fiction” session. Our 2020 conference was entitled “Beyond Borders: Empires, Bodies, Science Fictions,” and we are currently planning a 2021 conference around the theme of Activism & Resistance. Expect a call for papers for that around early Spring.

LSFRC is not affiliated with any external bodies or institutions, although we enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship with Birkbeck’s Centre for Contemporary Literature. We also maintain friendly relations with the Beyond Gender collective, Vector, and Utopian Acts. Our events are open to all, regardless of geographical location; there is no LSFRC membership structure, and events we host always offer a free registration option. Our primary community presence is in our Facebook group, but we also maintain a Twitter page and website. We support and encourage diversity in sf studies and fandom, not only in the range of approaches to the genre, but also in our commitment to providing a welcoming space for engagement with sf for people of all backgrounds and experience.

Our 2020 activities began with a screening of Sun Ra’s *Space is the Place* as part of the “Beyond Borders” programme, followed by reading group sessions on Tade Thompson’s *Rosewater* and stories from the *Broken Stars* (ed. Ken Liu) anthology in February and March, the latter of which was conducted in part as a teach-out on a picket line at Birkbeck, University of London. Subsequent reading group sessions—Janelle Monae’s *Dirty Computer* in April, N.K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season* in May, stories from *Walking the Clouds* (ed. Grace Dillon) in June, Ahmed Saadawi’s

FEATURES

SFRA Country Report: The UK

Frankenstein in Baghdad, and Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* in August—and other events all took place online. The switch to online facilitated remote participation from people based outside of London, and for those still unable to attend we post session reports and/or bibliographies to our website. During this time, we also hosted a work in progress event that featured a guest talk from Glyn Morgan, started up an informal film club for remote group viewings, and hosted a bonus reading group session and Twitter Q&A as part of the launch of M. John Harrison's collection "Settling the World." In September, our efforts were focused on the Beyond Borders conference, after which several members of our team—Tom Dillon, Sing Yun Lee, and Katie Stone—stepped down after years of stellar service. In the wake of their departure, we issued a call for new directors that elicited a slew of excellent applicants, and our team now consists of Ibtisam Ahmed, Angela Chan, Avery Delany, Cristina Diamant, Rachel Hill, Guangzhao Lyu, Mia Chen Ma, Sasha Myerson, Josie Taylor, and myself.

The remainder of 2020 was spent formulating and launching our theme for 2020-2021, Activism & Resistance. The theme was born of a desire to re-examine the relationship between activism, resistance, and the mass imagination with regards to sf. As a genre dedicated to imagining alternatives, sf offers a space of radical potential which allows for diverse explorations of dissent. It is also however a space that has been rightfully critiqued for its historic inequities, formed by and favoring white cis-het men. Our hope is to instigate a reckoning with how precarious bodies engage in activism and resistance in the context of their material realities and restrictions, and acknowledge how communities in the margins—queer, disabled, BIPOC, immigrants & refugees, religious minorities, indigenous populations, casualized workers, the homeless and unemployed—have specific ways of subverting and undermining oppressive systems. Our 2020 programme rounded off with reading group sessions on Kwodwo Eshun's "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" & John Akomfrah's *The Last Angel of History* (October), Begum Rokeya Hossain's "Sultan's Dream" & Bani Abidi's *The Distance From Here* (November), and Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (December). We also hosted a work in progress event in November that featured a stimulating and inspiring interview with Alison Sperling.

As things stand, it seems that our events will remain online-based for a while yet. In addition to the Activism & Resistance reading group sessions (the texts for which are listed below) and conference, we will be hosting a work in progress session sometime in Spring, and hope to also facilitate other events, with current ideas including an activism workshop and some sort of video games-focused event. We will also be brainstorming a theme for 2021-2022. We are eager to forge new, generative connections wherever and whenever possible, and are keen to ensure that our events and discussions are not cloistered within the bubble of career academia. While our focus is primarily scholarly, it is our view that any meaningful study of sf must necessarily engage with politics in a fuller way than academy-circumscribed approaches. We also acknowledge that we have much to learn, and welcome whatever transformative encounters with ignorance and learning we may meet in the days to come.

2021 Activism & Resistance Reading Group Texts:

January: *Brother from Another Planet*, John Sayles

February: *Elatsoe*, Darcie Little Badger

March: *Tales of Nevèrÿon*, Samuel R. Delany

April: *Deep Space Nine & Blake's 7* (selected episodes)

May: *New Suns*, *Disabled People Destroy SF*, and *How long 'til Black Future Month* (selected short stories)

June: *Wild Seed*, Octavia Butler

July: *80 Days*, Inkle Studios

August: *Emergent Strategy*, Adrienne Maree Brown

Part 2: Paul March-Russell

In 2020, the activities of the Science Fiction Foundation were necessarily constrained by Covid-19. Eastercon was cancelled, so there was no George Hay Lecture this year, whilst an abbreviated version of our AGM was moved online. The SFF Collection, housed at the University of Liverpool, was inaccessible for much of the year, but our Librarian, Phoenix Alexander, continued to answer online requests. We still had a visiting scholar though, Iren Boyarkina from Belarus, who researched the Olaf Stapledon Archive with the aid of an SFF bursary. *Foundation*, the journal of the SFF, appeared as per usual with two general issues and a special issue on Canadian science fiction. This issue also contained Katie Stone's Peter Nicholls Prize-winning essay on James M. Tiptree and a roundtable discussion, with Gerry Canavan, Jennifer Cooke and Caroline Edwards, about sf and apocalypse. Back issues of *Foundation*, since 2013, are now available online via Fanac while the revised SFF website has the beginnings of a cumulative index to the journal. Membership of the SFF remains competitive – students can join for £15 (\$25) per year, overseas individuals for £32 (\$48) per year, and overseas institutions for £50 (\$82) per year. Please go to the Membership page of the SFF website or contact our secretary, Roger Robinson, at sff@becon.org.

Although in-person events were not possible, the SFF continued to support the Arthur C. Clarke Award and contributed two of this year's judges, Farah Mendlesohn and Chris Pak. Both the SFF and the Clarke Award sponsored an online celebration, in its fortieth year, of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. The organising committee—myself, Andrew M. Butler, Fiona MacDonald and Sonia Overall—had begun planning in the summer of 2018 with the intent of bringing together the three major HE providers in Canterbury (Canterbury Christ Church University, the University of the Creative Arts and the University of Kent) in a commemoration of Hoban's Kent-based apocalypse. Our initial vision was to feature a symposium on the Christ Church campus; a creative writing competition; dramatic, musical and puppet theatre performances; public lectures at the University of Kent and Canterbury Cathedral; a walking tour of sites in the novel; a book

group; films and public discussions at Kent and the local Curzon cinema; and commissioned artworks to be displayed around Canterbury and East Kent. We applied for funding from the Arts Council, England, only to narrowly miss out at the final stage, so we were forced to scale-down our plans. As it turned out, even if we had been funded, much of what we planned would have had been rendered impossible by the pandemic. On the eve of the lockdown in March, though, we received good news by becoming part of the Canterbury Festival program, which still went ahead in October with a mixture of online and socially distanced events.

In the wake of the lockdown, and its continuing effects over the summer, we opted to move our remaining plans online. These consisted of the symposium ('Sum Poasyum'), the competition in collaboration with the local Save As Writers, and the book group with support from the Festival. With only a small budget at our disposal, we had to use our initiative and to make the most of opportunities. We devised a webpage via the Canterbury Christ Church website, and we received free illustrations of *The Legend of St Eustace* from the Canterbury Archaeological Society, and drawings from Hoban's papers courtesy of the Beinecke Library. We asked for short (five-minute) responses to the novel from, amongst others, Neil Gaiman, Paul Kincaid, Una McCormack, David Mitchell and Max Porter, which we uploaded to our own YouTube channel. In exchange, we asked viewers to contribute to two local charities. Fiona received funding from the Whitstable Biennale to complete her filmed response to the novel, which also took the overall name of our celebration—*Sum Tyms Bytin Sum Tyms Bit*. Fiona's film was premiered on 15th October, one day before the 40th publication of *Riddley Walker*, at the Folkestone Festival of Looking. In the meantime, we took guidance from Francis Gene-Rowe and Lars Schmeink, who had coordinated online and streaming events over the summer, and from the IT team at Canterbury Christ Church. Due to the institutional support, we used Christ Church's preferred platform, Blackboard Collaborate, which in the end worked well.

The symposium took place on 24th October from 11 am to 5 pm. We began with Emily Guerry's talk about the iconography of *The Legend of St Eustace*, the medieval mural that first inspired Hoban. The second session was a collaboration with the Kent Animal Humanities Network (Angelos Evangelou, Karen Jones, Kaori Nagai, Charlotte Sleigh), who focused on the role of dogs, borders and the nuclear context. The first post-lunch session featured a conversation between Fiona and Esi Eshun, a talk by Sara Trillo, and a live performance by Amy Cutler. The final session included a conversation between myself and the novel's BBC Radio adapter, Dominic Power, and a roundtable discussion. The sessions were recorded and can be viewed here: <https://blogs.canterbury.ac.uk/sumtymsbit/archive/>. The winners of the prose and poetry competitions were announced that evening, and a virtual walking tour took place the following day.

FEATURES
SFRA Country Report: The UK

2021 is a significant year for the SFF since it marks the 50th anniversary of its inception. We hope to be able to celebrate this in-person, online, and in the pages of the journal. Although not an SFF venture, with Una McCormack and the team at Goldsmiths Press, I have co-founded a new intersectional feminist press, Gold SF. We have currently received over twenty manuscripts and are beginning to read through them. Our editorial board consists of writers (Anne Charnock, Sheree Renee Thomas), critics (Maureen Kincaid Speller) and academics (Joan Haran, Robin Reid). Proposal guidelines can be found here: <https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-press/features/goldsmiths-press-launches-new-sf-imprint/>. My other venture, SF Storyworlds (Gylphi Press), published its eighth volume in 2020, Paul Kincaid's study of Christopher Priest: <https://www.gylphi.co.uk/books/Priest>.