

SFRA Country Report: Germany

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Coming home from the first international academic conferences we ever attended, incidentally the ICFA, the SFRA, and the Utopian Studies conference—admittedly quite a few years back—we both agreed that science fiction people shared an incredibly warm and welcoming attitude that made it easy to catch fire. Engaged discussions over coffee about books, films, and games, which we all felt passionate about, helped to easily connect and make national and cultural borders seem meaningless. Nevertheless, SF scholarship is also a field where difference is crucial and, at its best, is celebrated as it adds depth and can yield the most productive results—both in the texts we engage with, as well as in our interpersonal, institutional, and academic contexts. SF fascinates us because it can come in so many different shapes and forms. Therefore, we were delighted to read the wonderful country reports from England and India and the last issues of *SFRA Review*, which gave us some insights into engagements with sf from (to us) largely new perspectives. We would like to contribute to this exchange and present to the members of the SFRA, a status report on how research in SF is faring in Germany.

The Science Fiction Club Germany (SFCD), a fan-organization, is arguably one of the oldest institutions of sf engagement in Germany. While it was already inaugurated in 1955, it took until the 1980s to bring enough public attention to the field to establish several national awards recognizing the growing interest in science fiction (and the fantastic more generally). In 1980, the Kurd Laßwitz Preis (named after the German ‘father’ of SF) was established, followed by the Phantastik-Preis (granted by the city of Wetzlar) in 1983 and the Science Fiction Award (granted by the SFCD) in 1985, and finally in 2012 the Seraph Award presented at the Leipzig book fair.

Leipzig has become the central public trade fair for the fantastic, connecting literary publishing with comics and cosplay and becoming a hub for fan engagement, while the Frankfurt book fair’s bigger and more established venue rather caters to the economic (and decidedly more mainstream and highbrow) side of the literary market. In addition, several larger commercial and a whole slew of smaller conventions keep fantasy and SF fans busy during the year, highlights being the German Comic Cons (currently in four different cities), MagicCon (since 2017, larger in scope but following in venue for Tolkien-based RingCon), and the science-fiction themed FedCon.

Research in science fiction—mainly conducted by SF enthusiasts—has been developing since the late 1970s, but due to historically rather rigid and conservative structures at universities and a strong focus on canon in the fields of literary and cultural studies (for the most part in German or English studies), this engagement has, for a long time, mostly taken place outside of academia. It fell to individuals and small institutions to begin early forays into the field. Academic interest in SF and fantasy slowly began to manifest with Suhrkamp (a well-regarded publishing house)

producing a book series of collected essays from both national and international authors (among them Roger Caillois, Louis Vax, and Edmund Wilson) on theoretical aspects of the fantastic: *Phaïcon: Almanach der phantastischen Literatur*, published in five volumes between 1974 and 1982. But a uniquely German research tradition was first institutionalized with the inauguration of the Phantastische Bibliothek Wetzlar, a research library, which began its collection and research work in 1987 and can be credited with establishing the first German-language book series¹ on research in the fantastic during the 1990s.

It took until 2010, though, to firmly anchor the fantastic as a field of university-based academic research in Germany. The Gesellschaft für Fantastikforschung (GFF, Association for Research in the Fantastic) was inaugurated in the fall of 2010 during a conference at the University of Hamburg and has since provided a research network for more than 120 members, establishing an annual international conference in varying locations in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Its next annual event will take place as an online conference, hosted by the Universities of Cologne and Bamberg under the title “Speculative Fiction and Ethics” from 23 to 25 September.² It might be appropriate to mention here that the GFF does offer small stipends for international students to attend the conference.

Overall, it can be said that, over the last decade, research in SF and the fantastic has become a much more respected and recognized field at German universities and has found its way into curricula. Even at conferences with a more general scope, papers on science fictional topics are no longer a rarity (one example would be the annual conference of the German Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies [GAPS] that hosted four distinct panels dedicated to SF). And as a productive perspective to contribute to diversified interdisciplinary research, the importance of SF has been recognized as well, with ‘third-party funded research projects such as Fiction Meets Science, which has dedicated a subproject to representation of science in postcolonial SF (that one of the authors of this text works for).

In terms of German-language academic journals on research in the fantastic, the *Zeitschrift für Fantastikforschung* (ZFF), established by the GFF, has the honor to be the first of its kind. Since 2011, the journal has published peer-reviewed original articles, German translations of key texts from other languages, introductions to international fantastic literatures, and much more twice per year. In 2019, the ZFF has become the first German-language journal to move to the open-access platform Open Library of the Humanities,³ establishing new and very successful formats, such as a collection of shorter essays under the rubric “Forum”, which initiates academic debates around new aspects of the fantastic and thus serves as an ideal spark for longer research endeavors, or unusual interviews on the fantastic, i.e. currently an interview with former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis about his book *Another Now: Dispatches from an Alternative Present* (2020).

As for science fiction production from Germany, there is a large field of creatives in SF covering a large range of areas, styles, and genres—ranging from the famous pulp series Perry

Rhodan (established in 1961 and still going strong, putting out a weekly space opera) to high literary endeavors that somewhat shy away from identifying with the genre (historically, SF was stigmatized with a low-brow reputation). Examples are Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti* (2009, *The Method*) or Christian Kracht's *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (2008, not translated into English, but meaning: "I'll be here in sunshine and in shadow"). One important issue for international audiences is the limited availability of translations of and English-language scholarship on German SF. Some (subjectively) selected texts of SF since the 2000s, which have been available in English translation, include Frank Schätzing's SF-thriller *The Swarm* (2004), Dietmar Dath's posthumanist philosophical novel *Abolition of Species* (2013), and Marc-Uwe Kling's recent social media satire *QualityLand* (2017). But if German SF has ever made a big international splash in recent years, then it is probably due to the Netflix series *Dark* (2017–20) by Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese. The show plays with well-established SF tropes of time travel but connects it with the 1980s nostalgia of *Stranger Things* and a very distinctly German sense of *Heimat* (home) and *Spießigkeit* (roughly translates to narrow-mindedness). It is international in its scope and yet can immediately be recognized as distinctly German—a mixture that is typical of much German SF.

All in all, Germany has a vibrant SF community, both in- and outside of academia, striving to diversify and connect with international perspectives. This feature helps us learn more about SF in other countries, and we are delighted at this opportunity to introduce our own community you. We hope that we can further develop and foster exchange and connections beyond our own contexts.

Notes

1. Schriftenreihe und Materialien der Phantastischen Bibliothek Wetzlar, edited by Thomas Le Blanc - <https://www.phantastik.eu/images/Publikationskataloge/KatalogSchriftenMaterialien.pdf>.
2. Extending a warm invitation, please do attend: <https://fantastikforschung.de/jahrestagung/jahrestagung-koeln-bamberg-2021/>.
3. <https://zff.openlibhums.org/>.

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