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Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy:
Interview with Sephora W Hosein

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay

Sephora W Hosein (Senior Department Head and collection Head of the Merrill Collection at the Toronto Public Library).

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay/Fafnir

Could you briefly introduce the Merrill Collection and its history?

SWH

The Merrill Collection began with a donation in 1970 by SF author, Judith Merrill, of her personal collection of 5 000 books. The collection was named the Spaced Out Library. The collection continued to grow and was relocated from its original space once before finally finding a home in its current space, inside the Lillian H. Smith library branch of the Toronto Public Library, in 1990. It was renamed The Merrill Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy. Today the collection has grown to nearly 80 000 items, including approximately 5000 graphic novels, several magazine and periodical titles including pulp magazines, a smaller collection of non-fiction titles, a small collection of French titles, manuscripts, art, small press books, and the world's largest collection of tabletop role playing games.

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay/Fafnir

Could you give us an insight into archival material or unique research collections at the Merrill that may be of particular interest to researchers in science fiction and fantasy?

SWH

The aim of the collection is to continue to collect one of everything that is written in English, or has been translated into English, that is speculative in nature. We try very hard to fill in any gaps in the collection and actively collect full runs of series. We have a very large, comprehensive collection of primary source material that people travel from around the world to use in their research. We have had visiting academics from Australia, the U.K., and the U.S. this year alone.

Some unique items we have include:

- A first edition of *The Ship That Sailed To Mars* by William Timlin, from 1923. Only 2000 copies were ever printed, and today only 200 exist in North America.
- A first edition of *La Vie Électrique* by Albert Robida, from 1893.
- Several original editions in English and French written by Jules Verne
- A first edition of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, from 1897
- Possibly the only existing copy of the *Codex serafinianus* in North America

The wealth of the collection is comprised of fiction titles, including books, novels, and anthologies. Book covers are kept intact as they are important to bibliographic researchers.

The periodicals include critical journals and fiction, and are collected comprehensively. Fanzines are treated as periodicals, and the pulps in our collection date mostly from 1926 onward, with a few published earlier.

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay/Fafnir

Could you tell us about some of the research activities at the Merrill? What kind of research facilities and support does it provide?

SWH

The collection is maintained under strict environmental controls, in closed stacks. The stacks are humidity, light, and temperature controlled. The reading room is reserved primarily for researchers using collection materials, and is maintained as a quiet study space. No food or beverages are allowed inside the reading room, and all visitors are asked to store their bags and coats in free lockers that are provided. Anyone using collection materials is asked to register and show identification. The materials are all reference, so they must remain inside the reading room at all times.

We have several finding aids available to the public, including the online catalogue, series list (providing chronological and suggested reading orders), a list of graphic novels, and a list of role playing games.

We have several PhD candidates who use the collection in their research, and we strongly encourage scholars to send us their dissertations once completed, and they are interfiled with the collection materials.

The staff are very enthusiastic and knowledgeable, and we encourage questions and feedback from the public.

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay/Fafnir

What kind of research events, public events and dissemination events have been held in the past or are planned? Are there any particular conventions and events that the Merrill is associated with? Alternately, is it possible to organize events in association with the Merrill Collection?

SWH

Past events at the Merrill have featured renowned writers and artists including Guy Gavriel Kay, Charles de Lint, Neil Gaiman, John Scalzi, Cory Doctorow, Terry Gilliam, and Joe Hill.

I started working in the collection in June 2017, and during my time here we have had several events:

- A panel discussion featuring 10 authors who contributed to 2 anthologies *The Sum Of Us: Tales of the Bounded and Bound*, and *Where the Stars Rise: Asian Fiction and Fantasy*.
- An author talk from Canadian fiction author Joe Mahoney, including a reading from his novel *A Time and a Place*
- A presentation and reading from renowned Klingon linguist Dr. Lawrence M. Schoen
- A screening of *The Northlander* and subsequent Q&A period with Métis director Benjamin Ross Hayden
- A movie night featuring a screening of the original 1954 *Godzilla*

There are several events planned for 2018, including a series of gaming workshops. As Merrill owns the largest collection of tabletop RPGs, we are planning to host a series of afternoons

when people can come and learn more about them, and hopefully inspire them to start their own groups.

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay/Fafnir

As the Head Librarian of the Merrill Collection, could you tell us about yourself, and your particular interests in science fiction and fantasy? Looking ahead, what is your particular vision for the future of the collection, especially as a research space?

SWH

My interest in SF and Fantasy began at a very early age. My father was a film projectionist, so I saw a lot of films, and quickly became enchanted with those in the SF/Fantasy genre. I was always an avid reader too, and to this day love reading. My interests are all over the SF/Fantasy map and also extend to many popular franchises – *Dune*, *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, *The Wheel of Time*, *Star Trek*, *LOTR*, Steampunk, Arthurian themes, Vampires, Vikings, Horror, Fairy Tales, Magic, etc.

I consider SF/Fantasy to be the most inclusive type of fiction because it allows us to conjure the world(s) in which we wish to live. It has always fueled my imagination, and given me a way to think of the world as more than the way that I see or hear it. It offers alternative ways of being and allows us to make sense of that which sometimes seems very senseless.

My goals for the collection include collecting as many gems as our budget supports, and to build upon the great work that has been done to make this a world class collection. I will continue to strive for an inclusive, well-rounded collection – one that supports indigenous initiatives, one that celebrates Canadian content, and one that encompasses as widely as possible all that is fantastic in literature.

I also aim to increase awareness of the collection, welcome more visitors, and to continue to grow and provide the resources and materials that make us an excellent research destination.