



## Conference Report: 40th International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts

Fantastical Politics and the Politics of Fantasy  
March 13–16<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
Orlando, Florida

*Paul Williams*

Even at 6 a.m. in mid-March, Florida is humid, and, after a restless four-hour red-eye flight from dry and chilled Salt Lake City, the sudden exposure to the polar opposite environment gave me a sense of whiplash and made me a bit cranky. Happily, 30 minutes later I checked into the Orlando Airport Marriott Lakeside. After a few hours of sleep my own spirits flipped as suddenly as the weather. Once again I found myself amidst my tribe, namely fellow scholars gathered for the 40th International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts.

During my first year of graduate school I initiated what has developed into this annual pilgrimage. At the time I felt that I had overcome some Goliath-sized task in getting accepted to the conference, but now it is routine. This means that the fae glamour of the conference has waned a bit, but its meaning has grown more personal for me. Instead of wandering around awestruck by authors and scholars alike, I now openly visit with members of the IAFA, hearing and sharing about research projects. Throughout the conference and the following days my Facebook pings with a flurry of new friend requests.

After four decades of trying to subtly advocate for the relevance of fantasy literature in the modern world, the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts did away with pretense and chose the subject “Politics and Conflict” as the conference theme. ICFA 2019 gathered together more than 100 authors and nearly 500 academics (graduate students, professors, and independent researchers) in Orlando from 13–16 March 2019 to discuss the intersections between fantasy and the mounting obstacles that trouble our society.

## Conference Proper

One hundred forty panels, each with two to four presenters, featured at the conference. Papers addressed questions such as the representation of women and LGBTQ+ individuals, both as characters in and producers of stories; gun control; immigration; the looming spectre of climate change; and more.

For every ICFA panel I attended there were several I missed. Still, I did make an effort to hear a variety of topics. Valerie Hegstrom (Brigham Young University) showed how the recent *Wonder Woman* (2017) film echoes and updates certain traits and tropes of female-warrior stories from the Spanish Golden Age, while Brian Attebery (Idaho State University) interrogated the concept of conflict as the driving force and organising principles of stories, suggesting alternative paradigms that authors, readers, and critics might adopt for creating, enjoying, and evaluating stories. My own paper on community-building through self-narration was paired with ecocritical essays based upon novels classical and modern. Presentations on graphic novels, epic poetry, clowns in horror fiction, and more highlighted and demonstrated the deep political concerns felt by members of the IAFA and the relevance of fantastical literature when looking ahead at uncertain times to come.

This year's Author Guest of Honor was G. Willow Wilson. She is best known as the creator of Kamala Khan in Marvel's *Ms. Marvel* comics, but she has also written in prose, first with her World Fantasy Award winner *Alif the Unseen* (2012) and now *The Bird King* (2019), newly released the week of the conference. I was fortunate enough to be standing in the right place (i.e. three feet away from Wilson) minutes before the opening ceremonies and introduced myself. I told her how I had recently read and greatly enjoyed *Alif the Unseen* and her standalone comic, *Cairo* (2007). Time was short, but we spoke for a bit about the role religion plays in her fiction and how she avoids evangelising while still taking her Muslim faith seriously in her art. Thanks to this ice-breaker meeting, I was able to hold an ongoing conversation with her throughout the conference, stealing minutes together at functions and between panels. She is a wonderful conversationalist and an insightful speaker.



The author with G. Willow Wilson, ICFA 2019.

Wilson regularly raised interesting questions about the political nature of fantasy literature. During the conference's opening panel discussion about politics in fantasy, for example, she readily responded to questions with acute insights. Perhaps her most striking comment was when she suggested that speculative fiction has brought us to the point where we might question whether or not the value of individuality as an end unto itself has expired. In other words, has the explorative nature of fantasy and science fiction revealed that humanity's interconnectivity supersedes the utility of pure individuality unto itself? It's a bold question to ask, and

certainly cannot be answered in a 20-minute panel. The ensuing Q&A had no shortage of hands raised or guests eager to join the conversation. While no decision on these matters was (nor can be) reached, Wilson's asking the question set a tone for the conference to come.

Wilson's keynote speech, titled "Who Are You Calling Political? (Or, which labels are applied to which stories, and why)", began with the intriguing observation that "not everybody who writes about politics is considered to be a political voice, and some people are considered political by their very presence". She shared how, when she was asked to temporarily fill in as writer for *Superman* in 2009, she received a particularly pointed piece of hate mail accusing her of being part of "the socialist, Islamic, homosexual" cabal aimed at destroying America. She had not yet even written a single issue of the comic and was only filling in so J. Michael Straczynski could rest for three months. Still, for some reason Wilson – who is female and an American convert to Islam – found herself a politicised entity by virtue of her existence, independent of any work she had (not yet even) produced for the *Superman* line. In contrast, many other writers (typically white men) actually make political comments in their fiction but somehow escape the label "political writer". To Wilson, texts, including escapist fantasy, are inherently political because humans are so politically minded, but those political labels are arbitrarily applied.

Wilson's invitation to us was to consider how we as readers politicise some authors while failing to politicise others. By reminding us that all texts are political, emerging from the author's own political context, she sought to destabilise some of the tropes readers use to dismiss one text in favour of another.

Response to the talk was enthusiastic. Wilson held the audience's attention effortlessly, garnering thunderous applause. All copies of *The Bird King* in the conference book room were sold out within five minutes after the keynote. The remainder of Wilson's visit was marked by a general tendency to find her seemingly mobbed by attendees increasingly excited to follow up on her comments. One friend of mine posted a representative comment on social media, "I could listen to G. Willow Wilson for hours! What a delightful, insightful, creative example she offers – both personally and in her characters".

For those interested in Wilson's talk, it will be published in the corresponding conference issue of the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* (anticipated Volume 31.1). In addition to the keynote address, the same issue will include the transcript of an interview between Wilson and Noran Amin, a PhD candidate at Idaho State University. Mark Bould (and his impressive supply of black t-shirts) served as Scholar Guest of Honor. His keynote talk built upon Wilson's, but whereas she encouraged us to recognise the political underpinnings of fantasy literature, Mark suggested that fantasy and science-fiction literature challenge us to rethink the political paradigms of our modern world. As world governments and private businesses afflict our environment and reinforce stagnant, oppressive systems of power, it is our pleasure in fantastic literature to discover better alternatives. "[W]e need to have better stories: not static utopian visions, but pathways to the utopian horizon that will always exceed our vision. We need to stop accepting that truism attributed to Fredric Jameson, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism; we need to raise our game".

## Awards

Each ICFA closes with a celebratory banquet where the IAFA presents awards for scholarship, creative works, and service to the association.

*Jamie Bishop Memorial Award* – a critical essay written in a language other than English.

Recipient: Carlos Abraham

*Robert A. Collins Service Award* – presented to an officer, board member, or division head for outstanding service to the organisation.

Recipients: Judith Collins (daughter of the award's namesake) and Gary K. Wolfe

*William L. Crawford Award* – recognises an outstanding new writer whose first fantasy book was published during the previous calendar year.

Recipient: R. F. Kuong for *The Poppy War*

*Dell Magazines Award* – best unpublished and unsold science-fiction or fantasy short story submitted by a full-time undergraduate college student.

Recipient: Ana Maria Curtis for "Military Sunset"

*Distinguished Scholarship* – career award for significant contributions to the field of scholarship of literature of the fantastic.

Recipient: Mark Bould

*David G. Hartwell Award* – awarded to a graduate student who submitted the most outstanding paper to the conference.

Recipient: Sheetala Bhat

## Conference Logistics

This year's ICFA also marked an important milestone for the conference. Donald E. Morse, a charter member of the IAFA, has served as Conference Chair for 35 years, and decided that ICFA 40 would be his last in that capacity. Donald has been a beloved figure of the conference and his commentary as master of ceremonies at the opening and closing receptions and luncheons have been ICFA staples. Fortunately we expect to continue seeing and visiting with him at future ICFAs, as the Board has granted him the status of Chair Emeritus and he is welcome to attend any year he should desire. A new conference chair has yet to be appointed.

Additionally, this year Sherryl Vint completed her three-year tenure as IAFA President. Dale Knickerbocker has accepted the post and will oversee the association for the next three years.

Of great importance this year was the conference business meeting. Due to changes in management at the Orlando Airport Marriott Lakeside, the IAFA is debating a change of venue in the near future. Alternate hotels in Orlando are under consideration, as are options in Toronto, Canada. The final decision has yet to be

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made, but those interested in attending ICFA in the future should be mindful of these potential changes.

But that as-yet-unknown decision will not hinder us from gathering at the Orlando Airport Marriott Lakeside in March 2020 for ICFA 41. The chosen theme will serve as a continuation of this year's: Climate Change, and the Anthropocene, with Guest Author Jeff VanderMeer and Guest Scholar Stacey Alaimo.

Regardless of where ICFA gathers in the future, or who is in charge of speaking, the conference persists as a gathering place for insightful conversations about the value and reach of the imagination. Every year there are new attendees, guests, and leadership, but the value of coming together to exchange ideas makes us better scholars, while the exchanges of time and self make us stronger as people. As society continues to work through the messiness of the immediate future we will rely on each other for support and guidance. Whether professors trying to meet scholarly obligations, graduate students desperately fighting to write just one more dissertation chapter, or authors earnestly hoping to envision the next important story to tell, we gather at ICFA and leave the better for it.

I look forward to ICFA 41, and this time I plan to book a non-red-eye flight.

*Biography:* Paul Williams received his M.A. in English from Idaho State University in spring 2018. A former high school English teacher, his interests include narrative theory, alternative history, religion, and any other topic he can fit under the umbrella of fantasy literature. He is now a doctoral candidate at ISU where he also serves as Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*.