



Science Fiction Collections at the University of Liverpool: Interview with Phoenix Alexander

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Phoenix Alexander is the Science Fiction Collections Librarian at the University of Liverpool, Special Collections and Archives.

Could you briefly introduce the Science Fiction collections at the University of Liverpool and its history?

The Science Fiction collections at the University of Liverpool constitute the largest catalogued library of science fiction in Europe. It includes the collection of the Science Fiction Foundation: one of the most prominent SFF research and educational organisations in the UK. The collections overall comprise over 35,000 books, over 5,000 periodicals and critical works, and archival holdings of major figures in British SF.

Some of the materials, such as the Olaf Stapledon archive, are owned by the University of Liverpool (Stapledon was a philosophy lecturer and took his Ph.D. at Liverpool), but the SF Foundation's materials were brought over from their original home in the North East London Polytechnic (now University of East London). The materials came to Liverpool in 1993 and my predecessor, Andy Sawyer, was the librarian until his retirement in 2018.

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

Probably not with any kind of brevity! Highlights of our holdings including the Olaf Stapledon, John Wyndham, John Brunner, and Ramsey Campbell archives, the papers of Ellen Datlow (one of the foremost editors of horror in contemporary publishing), and the libraries of Brian W. Aldiss and Arthur C. Clarke. We hold comprehensive runs of every major SF periodical, as well as an amazing collection of zines (fan-made pamphlets) that give fascinating and easily overlooked insights into the history of the genre.

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

One of the main services we offer is the use of the reading room for viewing materials from our collections. Special Collections and Archives (SCA) isn't like a regular library: you can't check books out and take them out of the building, for one! As well as being able to physically view our materials in-house, we have created several online exhibits and recorded virtual lectures on various items in SCA. These are all viewable via our blog: manuscriptsandmore.liverpool.ac.uk. I also use the materials for teaching as part of the MA in Science Fiction Studies offered by the Department of English.

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 you're associated with? Alternately, is it possible to organize events in association with you?

Well, as you might imagine, in-person events have not taken place during the past year due to the ongoing pandemic. However, SCA staff were hard at work creating digital content to continue the conversations about our holdings and literature more broadly. I recorded a short video series titled "Resisting Dystopia", in which I introduced ten books that I felt spoke to our current moment. I also created an online exhibit on Arthur C. Clarke – showcasing some of our newly acquired items – and my colleagues Niamh Delaney and Robyn Orr created exhibitions on early printed books and student life at Liverpool, respectively. Links to all of our online exhibitions may be found at libguides.liverpool.ac.uk/library/sca/exhibitions. For videos on SF texts (and more!), check out our YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdPRzLKjZQGxggnsne7nfhg>.

Pre-pandemic, I organised pop-up exhibits at the International Slavery Museum and for the University of Liverpool's commemorative event celebrating the anniversary of the moon landings, and participated in an ongoing collaborative project on Terry Pratchett with Senate House Library and Trinity College, Dublin. Our next collaborative project is the World Museum's "AI: More Than Human" exhibit, which includes items from our SF periodical collections and a short video lecture on the history of AI in SF literature.

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

Absolutely! I actually started out reading a lot of fantasy as a kid, including lots of naughty books by David Gemmell that in hindsight I was far too young to read. I've always been a huge gamer, too (board, video, role-playing), drawn to the immersive poetics of invented worlds.

Initially training as a fashion designer after leaving high school, I then moved back into literary studies and worked as a curatorial assistant at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library while I was completing my doctorate at Yale University.

I am a scholar and writer of science fiction, as well as a librarian, and my work has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Black Static*, *Safundi: the Journal of South African and American Studies*, and *Science Fiction Studies*, among others.

My research interests cover the intersections of librarianship and curatorial practice, speculative fiction, and social justice. My work is informed by the question of how archives can serve as literary "home places" (after Carla Peterson's definition) for marginalised creators who have been historically undervalued – and whose work has had to take on new and innovative forms for recognition. In the future, I would love to acquire more archives of underrepresented voices in the SF collections: women, authors of colour, and queer authors in particular.