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FINFAR – A Gift from Fandom to Academia

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The official start of organized Finnish science fiction and fantasy fandom dates to 1976, and by the early 1980's several fanzines were in existence. However, it takes some 15–20 years for a generation of teenage fandom to grow up and start university careers. Some of them will gravitate towards literature studies and get the bright idea that they might actually make an academic subject of this thing they love, science fiction and fantasy. The mainstream literary culture, both generally and in academia, saw realism as the normal and respectable kind of literature. For a science fiction fan it was hard to find a university teacher who would show any interest in a study of speculative fiction, let alone know enough of the subject to advise their students.

This was also the experience of Vesa Sisättö, an active fan who had done his graduate work on fantasy without getting any advice of his teachers in the University of Helsinki. In the year 2000, the Millennium Finncon was to be in Helsinki, and Vesa, together with Kari Kanto, was in charge of the science programme. While Kari took care of the (natural) science lectures, Vesa decided to organize a meeting for others who were in need of peer support in their studies on speculative fiction. The pre-published programme of Finncon 2000 invited people who were doing their graduate studies in science fiction and fantasy literature to come and hear about what others were doing and to exchange tips and experiences with each other. The same notice was spread around the departments of literature in Finnish universities. It certainly worked: well over 20 interested persons gathered in an afternoon session and some of them presented their work. Alas, precise documentation of the meeting seems to be available no longer.

This was the first proper meeting of Finnish science fiction and fantasy researchers. There had been preliminary steps of some kind in the year before, when the 1999 Finncon in Turku had invited high school teachers of literature and university students to hear a series of lectures on speculative fiction. Nevertheless, the meeting in the Millennium Finncon in 2000 was the start of a continuing effort. People wanted to make researchers' meetings a regular thing in Finncons, and thereafter every Finncon has included a summer research seminar on speculative fiction. Once a meeting has also been organized in winter, namely as a working group in the conference of The Finnish Society of Cultural Studies.

The first meeting had gathered quite a lot of people; probably many of them had just wanted to meet others and talk about their experiences. The following meetings demanded more of the participants: everybody should bring a paper and present it. There was first a decided drop in attendance, but it has been slowly building up again. The precise documentation of papers is available since the Turku Finncon in 2004: there have usually been 7–9 papers in each seminar, varying from 4 (Turku 2004) to 14 (Helsinki 2013). That means a two-day seminar, during Thursday and Friday before the Finncon weekend. In the course of years, over 60 different researchers have presented their papers; so far only four of them have come from outside Finland.

Several aspects of the research meetings have stayed the same since the year 2006. By then, the name FINFAR, for Finnish Fantastic Researchers, was adopted, an e-mail list for news and information (scifi-res) was started and has been in regular use; since then a CFP in both Finnish and

English has been sent out early in January, all papers have been sent to all participants (by e-mail), and every paper has had two teacher commentators (plus of course the eager common discussion). The early meetings were just that: meetings for people who wanted peer support and were willing to present their own study, whatever the subject. Starting from 2006 the meetings – and CFPs – have been thematic, some connected to the theme of Finncon of the year, some separate from that. The themes have asked questions about borders, outsiders, utopias, YA literature, journeys, methodologies, theories, myths, aliens, and opposing forces in fantasy and science fiction. The meetings have usually been organized together with a local university institute or department, and held in the university rooms, even when the actual Finncon venue was elsewhere.

Some teachers have been involved from very early on: Irma Hirsjärvi from the University of Jyväskylä, Frans Mäyrä and Liisa Rantalaiho from the University of Tampere, and Markku Soikkeli from the University of Turku, later from the University of Tampere. When Matti Savolainen lived, he involved the University of Oulu, and several of his students have continued to be among the most active participants. Since the 2009 meeting, Merja Polvinen from the University of Helsinki has been a pillar of strength for FINFAR, and since the 2011 FINFAR-meeting in Turku, Sofia Sjö from Åbo Akademi has brought yet another university among the FINFAR circle. Occasionally, Merja Leppälahti from the University of Turku and Paula Aarvas from the University of Helsinki have also been teacher-commentators. What should especially be noted is that none of these teachers has been paid for their work, mostly not even for their expenses. That's fandom for you.

FINFAR has always been intimately connected to the Finncons. The meetings have often ended in participating in the programme of Finnish Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association FSFWA, where those of Finncon Guests of Honour who are authors give speeches or have panel discussions. Indeed, a valuable input to the FINFAR meetings has come from Finncon Guests of Honour, for some of the GoHs have actually been invited as researchers and/or critics of speculative fiction, like Farah Mendlesohn, Adam Roberts and Stefan Ekman. The most important of them, however, has been Cheryl Morgan, who has generously given her time and expertise as a critic to the FINFAR meetings since the year 2007. That's why she was also made the first honorary member of the official FINFAR Society.

The participating students have come from many disciplines, mostly from humanities and social sciences, but from a wide spectrum: Finnish language and literature, English language and literature, general linguistics, translation studies, folklore, religion studies, history, philosophy, sociology, media studies, cultural studies etc. Their research has covered literature, films, TV-series, comics, and included both textual and reception studies. However, during the years there have been two major changes, all because the students have grown up. This means that the first meetings usually included students doing their graduate work, but in the later years the majority have been on the postgraduate level, doing their doctoral dissertations. A necessary corollary to that has been the change to the use of the English language in the papers and the seminar discussions. Partly this has been necessary to enjoy the presence of international guests, but it has also meant a growing internationalization. This is a welcome and necessary development, but also a problem for FINFAR. We still have to consider how to reach the younger students and not scare them off.

Anyway, already by the year 2006 the situation was clear: we needed to find institutional support for the young generation of science fiction and fantasy researchers. The teachers would continue with their (unpaid) input, but where would the students get money to travel to conferences abroad? At that time, the Finnish academic scenery included thematic graduate schools financed by the Ministry of Education. Could FINFAR start one of its own? The trouble was that a fulltime professor in some university would have to take the responsibility, and there was no one available, all the even mildly sympathetic ones being too busy. This path petered out. After a few years it was clear that FINFAR was not just rambling along but actually producing good papers, good enough to reserve an international audience, and our research area ought to count as an academic field in itself.

What was the way to officially and publicly establish the status of FINFAR? During the meeting in Helsinki Finncon 2013 this all crystallized rapidly in a few interactions during one afternoon. This is how it went:

We should finally start our own scientific society and apply for membership in the central organization of Finnish scientific societies – The FINFAR society would need its own web pages, could the secretary of FSFWA help us? – Yes, easily, and he could also make the web pages for a journal – Great, we'll start our own scientific journal – And why not make it a Nordic one at the same time, we have the contacts already!

There it was. Some necessary formalities, and a few weeks later both the FINFAR society and *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* were official.