



Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and  
Fantasy Research  
journal.finfar.org

A United Effort on an Autonomous Island  
– A Report from Archipelacon

*Jani Ylönen*

Year 2015 saw a Nordic alliance on the Convention front. Instead of hosting their own events on their respective mainlands, Swedish and Finnish fandoms joined forces to hold a con together. They chose the most neutral area possible, Åland, an autonomous and demilitarised Finnish island group, as the site of Archipelacon, a four day international con that ran from June 25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup>.

On Thursday 25<sup>th</sup>, entourages of fans, artists and scholars from both shores and beyond headed out to Åland. For some this journey already contained the first events as one of the organizing forces behind the event, the Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research, or FINFAR, began their academic endeavour on the ferry. Some twenty scholars that varied from degree students to senior researchers huddled in the confines of Silja Galaxy discussing their academic papers ranging from morals in zombie fiction to the ethical choices players face in video games while the archipelago flowed past. This was, however, only a warm up to Åland, where the guests barely had the time to find their bearings in Marienhamn's harbour before the official program roared off with the opening ceremony including the guests of honour, a brass orchestra, and plenty of excitement.

The first day, while only a half in length, encapsulated some of the central interests and strands that ran through the whole con from the charismatic guests of honour to topical issues such as problems with rabid canines and, overall, to a constant flow between genre boundaries and the media. The first guests of honour under fire were the Nordic literary ones, Karin Tidbeck and Johanna Sinisalo, who in an interview defined inter-Nordic genre boundaries among other things. Also, those not yet familiar with the debacle were brought up to date with the Hugo award affair by panels both discussing the cultural phenomena connected to it and the works actually short-listed for the awards. Finally, the short but information-packed day was brought to an end by a chamber music orchestra Quinsonitus featuring Sanja Iljin who played some of the most beloved SF&F themes and songs from the audiovisual history of the genre.

The second day began early and ended late with the program running in seven locations from ten in the morning to nine in the evening. The dawn saw the beginning of the extensive Academic Track that covered scholarly work from various points and fields of interests throughout the whole conference. The track began with a strong dose of genre theory provided by Farah Mendlesohn, Hanna-Riikka Roine and Audrey Taylor who discussed the features and definitions of speculative fictions from novels to short stories. The theory heavy beginning was balanced in the later presentations where the field broadened, for example, into comics and games including two presentations from the fairly recent “Ducktor”<sup>1</sup> Katja Kontturi, who discussed Duckburg for the benefit of both scholars and general attendance. However, as expected the biggest crowds were

<sup>1</sup> “Ducktor”, since Kontturi did her doctoral dissertation in 2014 on Don Rosa's Disney comics featuring duck characters (editor's comment).

drawn by one of the most anticipated guests of honour and probably the most well-known speculative writer alive, George R.R. Martin, whose reading of a chapter from the future release in *The Songs of Ice and Fire* series gathered hordes of fans to the main auditorium. On the other hand, smaller venues gathered respectable audiences throughout Archipelacon with presentations on scenes outside the well-beaten path of Anglophone SF offering glimpses, for example, into Chinese and Latvian scenes, both born in interesting cultural environments. However, at the end of the day it was time to return to Westeros, when characters created by Mr. Martin marched on stages with tassels and thongs in the form of a burlesque show.

On the third day, or Saturday to the outside world, the Academic Track started with technological visions of artificial intelligences, from where it continued into the realms of dystopias and fantastic races. Stefan Ekman, one of the organizers of the academic program, also found time to present on how fantasy maps relate to the rest of the text. Later, he also chaired the key note speech by the academic guest of honour Gary Wolfe, who delved into genre theory. Sadly, his quite interesting speech, which mainly discussed how boundaries have been drawn between different speculative fictions, was only the first part of a larger work with the latter part aiming for fresher perspective. The day also included the guest of honour speech by Karin Tidbeck where she revealed her dark past in roleplaying and its effects on her fiction, which was a few days earlier categorized as Nordic Weird. Later, George R.R. hosted a screening of an episode of the *Game of Thrones* television series followed by a Q&A about the adaptation of the novel and writing a screenplay. This linked nicely with Archipelacon's other sessions on adaptations, for example, from screen to comics and vice versa, each discussing the flux between different mediums so relevant in speculative fiction today. Once more the program for the day ended with costumes, albeit ones more family friendly, as the final show, before the pool party that is, was a masquerade.

While the three days full of program and parties had clearly taken their toll on the participants, many managed to drag themselves to Sunday's academic sessions, which ranked among the most popular ones of the whole Archipelacon. Anna Leena Harinen's presentation on the adaptation of *Song of Ice and Fire* characters in the *Game of Thrones* filled the seats and later presentation by Cheryl Morgan on the reception of one of Neil Gaiman's works in LGBT community filled the entire room. However, neither should one neglect to mention Anders Sandberg, a rare non-literary/-cultural studies scholar, whose fascinating presentation on augmented intelligence in SF texts was between the two. Finally, the academic track was wrapped up by Merja Polvinen's, who as one of the organizers had also spoken the introductory words in the first session, presentation on a novelette by Catherynne M. Valente, which would no doubt have garnered even more attention had the author's presence in 2016's Finncon been already announced. Before the closing ceremony, Gary Wolfe and Niall Harrison discussed literary critique, one of the final missing pieces in a very thorough and informative convention. Archipelacon ended with a note of happiness and a hope, which might for some turn into a nightmare, that the party will continue in 2017 with a World Con in Helsinki (which it will!).