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Fantastic Conference Days in Sunny Florida –
Report from the 35th International Conference on the Fantastic in the
Arts

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The 35th International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts took place in Orlando, Florida, on March 19–23, 2014. Themed “Fantastic Empires,” the conference covered a myriad of fantastic and science-fictional topics from empires to orcs and from literature to television series. Guests of honor at the conference were science fiction writers Nnedi Okorafor and Ian McDonald; guest scholar was Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., and special guest emeritus was Brian Aldiss, who probably does not need any kind of introductions.



Not even jet-lag could spoil the joyous feeling of summer for the Nordic participants as it was warm and sunny in Orlando when the conference began on Wednesday. Luckily there was time to relax by the poolside at the Orlando Airport Marriott for a while before the opening of the conference in the afternoon.

At the opening ceremony, conference participants were warmly welcomed but sad to hear that the resident alligator in the pond behind the hotel had passed away during the year (but as it turned out, another alligator had found its way into the pond and replaced the deceased reptile). When

the conference program continued with the opening panel titled “Imagining Empire,” the audience got to follow a lively discussion on empires both in fiction and in the real world, the risk of cultural appropriation, as well as the responsibilities of critics and academics.

After the panel, there was still time for one session, or rather several parallel sessions on fantastic topics from the human/animal boundary in children’s literature to international empires. As always in large conferences, in ICFA as well the biggest challenge a conference participant faces is having to choose from several interesting but simultaneous panels, as for every session attended there were up to nine sessions missed – though one definitely has to give credit for the ICFA organizing team, as the program is built in such a way that very seldom do sessions with similar topics overlap, and it is possible to follow most of the sessions on, say, postcolonial science fiction—and there were quite a few of them, due to the theme of the conference.

On Thursday morning, the panel on science fiction and postcolonialism approached the topic from various angles. The panelists discussed the relationship between science fiction and postcolonial theory and in the end, the panel seemed to agree that postcolonial questions are definitely good for the genre: they are pushing the envelope of what sf is—it could even be said that

sf has been given a new life through postcolonial issues. The panelists also pondered whether there is a risk of commodifying the postcolonial in science fiction, even though writer Nisi Shawl reassured the other panelist and the audience that commodification would require that someone could control how the postcolonial voices are coming through, and “that’s not going to happen.”

Postcolonial themes continued in a session on disrupting the colonial gaze, where there were interesting and entertaining papers from ethical cannibalism in *The Sparrow* to Vandana Singh’s postcolonial science fiction; and in another panel on race and colonialism in sf there were papers on Asiatic racialization, *Heart of Darkness* read as sf, and a paper by yours truly on how Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and Nnedi Okorafor have diversified sf in and with their fiction.

One of the points in my paper was that Okorafor’s characters are outspoken, and that proved to be the case with the author herself as well. In her guest of honor speech, Nnedi Okorafor memorized the evening she heard about her novel *Who Fears Death* winning the World Fantasy Award. She talked touchingly about “Writing Rage, Truth and Consequence,” social inequities, guns, and the meaning of education in today’s society – and about writing and weird things. Okorafor continued with the same themes later on in an interview with Andy Duncan. When asked about controversial and painful issues like female circumcision in her novels, she described the need to write about those things as well, because “change comes from people talking about something, learning and being passionate about it.”

The potential of writers and academics to act as agents of change was one of the themes in Istvan Csicsery-Ronay’s guest of honor speech “Science Fiction and the Imperial Audience,” which was equally moving, inspiring, and loaded with insights on how empires and imperialism have affected us all. After the guest of honor luncheon, members of the *Fafnir* crew advertised the brand new, fresh from the Internet, first ever issue of *Fafnir* to the conference goers with the help of Finnish chocolate and licorice toffee. A big thank you to everyone who stopped by and took our leaflet!

The amount of Nordic participants in ICFA has usually been quite good, and wherever Finns and Swedes are together, the situation tends to grow into a friendly competition. For several years now, there has been a rivalry between the Finns and the Swedes attending the conference on which country is more numerously represented that year. This year, there were five Finns, and four of us presented a paper at the conference. The other Finnish presenters at ICFA 2014 were Merja Polvinen, Jari Käkelä, and Mika Lojonen - all from the University of Helsinki. Polvinen presented a paper on “Scholarly Empires,” building on the ideas she presented in the previous *Fafnir*, that sf and mainstream literary theory could and should learn from each other. Käkelä gave a paper titled “Enlightened Empires: Asimov’s Future History,” and Lojonen introduced the concept of orc semiotics in his paper “The Rise of Orcs: The Evolution of and Redemption of Orcs and Orcish Societies.”

There were also five participants from Sweden, all of whom presented a paper or took part in panel discussions. Stefan Ekman from Lund University, fantasy literature division head of the conference at the time, was acting as a session moderator and taking part in a panel discussing academic job markets. Jerry Määttä from Uppsala University talked about “Elegies for an Empire: Imperial Melancholy in the Disaster Fiction of John Wyndham, John Christopher, and J. G. Ballard,” and Per Israelson of Stockholm University gave a paper titled “On the Names of Blue Wizards: the Tolkien Archive and Empire.” There were also Maria Lindgren Leavenworth from Umeå University, who presented a paper on “Finding Maps of Meaning: Collaborative World Building in Justin Cronin’s *The Passage* and *The Twelve*,” and Fredrik Tydal from Södertörn University with a paper titled “Bringing Out Henry James’s Little Monsters: Two Film Approaches to ‘The Turn of the Screw.’” Therefore, even if it was a draw in 2014 judging by the number of participants, the number of presenters admittedly clinched a victory for the Swedes. Finland hopes

to gets its revenge next year, but it would be nice to have other Nordic and European countries join in the light-hearted competition in the future.



After the four full conference days, many tired but happy academics went on a trip to the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral. Looking for something completely different, I was probably not the only one to visit the huge local media convention, Megacon, which happened to be held in Orlando the same weekend. After all, for a science fiction scholar it is also important to widen one's scope by getting to know the less academic side of sf, too. Megacon lived up to its megalomaniac name with tens of thousands of people crowding the hallways in spectacular costumes.

All in all, ICFA35 was full of thought-provoking papers and interesting people, and much was learned and many ideas gathered during the four days in March. In addition to the strictly academic program, there were entertaining author readings, film screenings, and of course, late night drinks by the pool. There is always a warm and welcoming atmosphere at ICFA and it is a student friendly conference where one gets feedback in a constructive and encouraging spirit. In the

“brief history” of ICFA conferences included in the conference program booklet, ICFA is commended as “one of the most diverse, energetic, provocative, and addictive interdisciplinary gatherings in the world.” It might sound like self-praise or hot air, but having been there now three times in five years, I can confidently say that the description is certainly true. Thank you again, ICFA!