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Conference Report:
Worldcon 77 Academic Track

August 15–19th, 2019
Dublin, Ireland

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The 77th Worldcon, held August 15 to 19 in Dublin, included an academic track that ran from morning until late afternoon throughout the event. With an average of three papers per session and five sessions per day, the track offered a variety of topics and scholars at various stages of their careers.

Although this Worldcon had about 5,500 paying members who divided their time between, on average, ten simultaneous program items, many sessions, especially the ones connected to Irish mythologies and history's connection to SF, garnered enthusiastic interest. This provided a chance for academic fans and general fandom to interact and share their expertise. Most of the presenters also tailored their content to a larger audience.

Heavily theoretical presentations were rare. There were exceptions, such as Dyrk Ashton's examination of Deleuzian crystallization in the *Lord of the Rings* films, which added a welcome philosophical contribution to the track. While the special opportunity for popularisation understandably guided many presentations, it was nevertheless slightly surprising that it took until the fourth presentation for someone to cite an academic source. One possible reason for the occasional scarcity of sources was the variation among presenters' experience as alongside early, mid-, or later-career academic professionals, there was also an unusually high percentage of independent scholars as well as graduate students giving their first conference presentations. In addition, many presenters were academics, but not active in the field of speculative-fiction studies. While this showed the width of scholarly interest into speculative fiction, it also resulted in many presentations that certainly approached their topics with scholarly exactness, but did not tie them to the current academic research on the topic. For example, Kristina Hildebrand, whose publications mostly

concern medieval literature, presented on POC characters in works of Joss Whedon; the presentation had a clear and interesting conclusion about their agency, but did not link to previous studies in the area.

While academic sources were not used in abundance in all the presentations, many presentations followed the conventions of the field without sacrificing ease of access. Several of these papers, such as Andrew Milner's presentation on climate change in the speculative fiction of the past twenty years, also discussed contemporary societal issues. Milner argued that many eutopian solutions are based on the removal of humans, which resulted in an interesting conversation on the contemporary global issue. Laura E. Goodin's presentation on hopepunk, on the other hand, discussed a fairly recent genre categorisation that has sought to underline variety in the often simplified category of dystopian fiction. Drawing on Alexandra Rowland's work, Goodin examined the subversive politics of fiction that does not fall to the despair and apathy that often dominate especially post-apocalyptic visions. Instead, hopepunk speculates on, for example, surviving and resolving the effects of climate change.

Like many others, Goodin used well-known examples, such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. Some likely chose this route particularly for this conference, but the phenomenon is not unfamiliar from other SF conferences. The academic track in Dublin was therefore not an exception in the sense that it seemed to chiefly concentrate on a fairly narrow part of its vastly varied possible research material. Especially when presentations discussed novels and other printed publications, the focus was primarily on fiction released decades ago. That being said, many presentations, such as Nora E. Derrington's examination of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Elizabeth A. Lynn's *Watchtower*, both published in 1979, introduced interesting fresh looks at older material. Overall, however, the conference demonstrated the habit of discussing canonised and often-examined works, from Asimov and *Neuromancer* to *LotR*, continuously; this trend continues to highlight the need for speculative-fiction scholarship to study more-contemporary material.

While printed works received the majority of attention, the track also discussed wide variety of interests, some even beyond fiction. Kelly C. Smith, for example, discussed problems with METI (messaging extraterrestrials), while Kevin Koidl discussed science-fictional ideas of future social-media communication. Audiovisual works were in a minority as subjects of research, as were, for example, the consumers of fictions. A rare discussion on SF and fan studies, a presentation by Paul Mason, in fact summarised that fan-studies scholarship rarely concerns SF fandom. However, it must be noted that Mason made a clear distinction between fans of literature and audiovisual media, thereby leaving out studies concerning fans of, for example, speculative-fiction films, apparently an old rift, especially in British and American fandom.

Worldcon 77 gathered scholars from around the globe. The academic program also had presenters from many nationalities although the majority came from English-speaking or European countries. English was the language of the conference, partially of course due to the location of the event. Nevertheless, it was noticeable that an overwhelming majority also discussed speculative fiction originally published in English and mostly authored by a native speaker of English. Among the exceptions was Denis Taillander's look into cyberpunk in Japan and one session concentrating on Chinese science fiction, but overall efforts to achieve internationality did not truly reach their multilingual potential. Nevertheless, the presentation concerning

speculative-fiction connections to Ireland were certainly an important and topical addition that in itself expanded the discussion from the usual British-American focus.

Overall, the five-day run of the academic track at the 77th Worldcon offered a varied and abundant offering of speculative-fiction scholarship. While the location of the track away from the main convention center perhaps made the program difficult to just wander into, it provided (as have previous Worldcon academic tracks) a special chance for fans and scholars to mingle and exchange thoughts. Consequently, future Worldcons, and especially the arrangers of their academic tracks, should consider how to further elevate the visibility of speculative-fiction research during the event. One possibility would be to add a researcher guest of honor whose presence in the ceremonies alone would remind the audience of the track. Perhaps further attention and interaction would even result in the increase of the number of studies concerning SF fandom that Paul Mason called for. Certainly, it would lead to more discussion, which was already lively after many presentations. During these exchanges, the listeners often suggested options to solve one of the problems mentioned previously; for example, the continuous use of the same material could be addressed by including useful reading tips not just from old works, but especially from recent works that will possibly lead to interesting future studies. Worldcons will hopefully offer opportunities for such interactions in the future as well and in an increasingly international context if the phenomenon of Worldcons being arranged outside of the US and other Anglophone countries apparent in recent years continues.

> *Biography*: Jani Ylönen (MA) is working on a doctoral dissertation at the University of Jyväskylä. His main interests lie in how ethical questions concerning gender and gene technology are depicted in contemporary science fiction. However, he also dreams of writing about postdoggies and dragons, often when he should be writing his dissertation.