

As so often happens, the epiphany came while I was standing in a very long line.

On a hot day last summer, I was one of hundreds of people waiting to get into Toronto's Comic, Science Fiction, Horror, Anime and Gaming Expo. A tourist family turned a corner, gaped at us, asked what the line was for, then hustled away fearfully. I realized that it was a real life illustration of the genre writers' dilemma. Call it the *flee the strange people* response.

It's the costumes. It's always the costumes.

That day in Toronto, costumes were everywhere: faux fur and foam rubber as far as the eye could see, *Star Wars* next to Sailor Moon beside Goth zombies and Trekkers. The writer's predicament isn't quite as conspicuous. Whether we call our field science fiction or fantasy, *sf/f*, speculative fiction, or any of the other labels that have emerged in recent years, it's a tough market. There are several reasons for this, and they tangle together into formidable stumbling blocks for writers, particularly for those just beginning their careers.

The first barrier is the widespread public belief that the field is made up of socially inept outcasts. Movies, comedy and teen culture have so consistently associated the images of 'freaks and geeks' and the *sf/f* world that the stereotype is accepted as truth. This persists despite the global success of the *Lord of the Rings* movies and the resurgence of comic book heroes, gradually eroding the border between fantasy and mainstream cultures. Introducing oneself as a *sf/f* writer is generally received with about as much enthusiasm as an infectious disease. Whether people had an unfortunate *Dungeons & Dragons* experience in high school, or whether they simply refuse to suspend disbelief long enough to visit a world not their own, many will dismiss anything with a *sf/f* label as unworthy of their attention. Not only unworthy: somehow worth/less, the literary equivalent of tabloid sensationalism. Publishing guidelines often refer to the field as simply 'genre writing', as if none other exists.

A growing difficulty is that the label itself has stretched almost to the point of uselessness. Not all fantasy features dragons or hobbits. Not all science fiction has robots in space. Thanks to public interest in genetic engineering and computer hacking, fiction based in science (the most basic definition of sf) has already infiltrated the general market. Attention, fans of Dan Brown, Michael Crichton, Jeffrey Deaver or that most literary of icons, Margaret Atwood: you may already have been contaminated. The entertainment industry has realized that a mixed-genre movie widens its market; hence the preponderance of 'action-comedy' or 'romance-drama' flicks. Bookstores, however, are unlikely to make the same move. Readers still have to declare allegiance to one aisle or another. Oddly, science fiction and fantasy are clustered in with horror and erotica, usually near the teen fiction. After a recent fruitless search of the genre shelves, I found several authors I wanted on the bland *Fiction by author* shelves. Perhaps the lack of key words (such as "elf" or "planet") in the titles had hoodwinked the employees. Or maybe our costumes are beginning to look uncannily like street clothes.

Once one has gathered the courage to reveal oneself as a genre writer, the next problem appears: finding representation. The most recent *The Canadian Writer's Market* lists fifty literary agencies, forty-three of which accept fiction. Of those, eleven specify 'no science fiction' or 'no genre writing'. That's a full quarter of the list eliminated before the task is begun. And though *The Writer's Market* defines mainstream fiction as "fiction that transcends popular novel categories such as mystery, romance and science fiction", at least seven agencies accept what they call 'mainstream fiction' while banning science fiction or fantasy. Others accept a dizzying array of fiction, specify 'no fantasy or sf', yet include notable genre authors in their clientele. The barriers separating the strange people from the general public are now so dilapidated that even corporate entities are confused. But few new writers will risk sending to an agency that states "no genre fiction" so emphatically in its guidelines.

Understandably, given all the dross that any literary agent encounters, some limits must be set. The potential for horrible, derivative sf boggles even a fan's mind. However, given the narrowed field and the high percentage of glutted agencies, what does a budding writer do? She can thank her lucky sci-fi stars for genre magazines, and try to make a living peddling short stories for a few cents a word. Specialty magazine or comics stores, word of mouth, and resource sites such as those at

spicygreeniguana.com provide creative launch pads. Success in those glossy or electronic pages might send appreciative little tendrils burrowing through the speculative fiction community until a sympathetic agent expresses an interest.

Since that community is an astonishingly large one, this plan has a chance of success. Through the scores of magazines in print and online, the hundreds of conventions taking place every year around the world, or the thousands of specialized websites, almost any member of the sf/f society is part of a very large insider network. Many of us have met authors and artists, editors, movie stars and directors. In fact, thanks to the anonymity of the internet, some of us *are* those people, hiding in plain sight under an e-costume.

Paradoxically, the size of the community may be our biggest problem. Whether by statistical fluke or because we immerse ourselves so thoroughly in imagined worlds, we're a creative bunch. Those of us who are both creative and literate often try writing our own worlds, or adding to the fictional ones we love. If we gathered in a physical community, we would have more aspiring artists and authors per square inch than any place else on Earth. So many dreamers, so few agents... and so few available pages, despite numerous genre publications. All our magazines receive far more material than they can publish, as do our printing houses. The market is almost supersaturated. It's great news for us consumer geeks, but more than a little daunting for those of us trying to join the producers' side.

Sometimes, if we're very careful, we can slip past the labels. Not only has sf/f begun to flow into the mainstream, it has a much longer history than most non-fans realize. Horror, fantasy and Gothic have evolved side by side for centuries. Now, even the stuffiest academic canon includes some examples of 'genre writing', whether in classic form or in the more recent magical realism style. So although many submission calls specify 'literary' fiction, they may accept a hint of magic in a well-told story – a twinge of the eerie, a technological *deus ex machina*, an uncanny twist in the tale – without even realizing it.

Gradually, more brave souls will see beyond our Vulcan ears, vampire teeth and vacuum suits. They'll notice that *Star Trek* novels regularly appear as *New York Times* best-sellers, and that our field's best writers have the talent to rival the Pulitzer short list. Thoughtful professionals will realize that a lucrative, literate (and literary) market is arranging itself on a titanium platter, waiting for agents and

forums to help carry it to a growing audience salivating in the next room. In the meantime, genre writers lead double lives as normal citizens with families and mortgages, blending almost seamlessly with society.

We're just not willing to give up our costumes yet.

This article originally appeared in *Word: Canada's Magazine for Readers + Writers* (2006). Volume 12; 9 & 10. Thankfully, and sparkly vampires notwithstanding, the sf/f landscape has since changed considerably.

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