

Don't Panic: The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Sci-Fi Scene

If you've never been to a science fiction convention, you probably have an image of one as a mixture of some Addams Family gathering and a multitude of Comic Book Guy characters from *The Simpsons*. And if that's what you think, then you're very wrong.

Well . . . okay, you're half right.

To its fans, the area of science-fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, horror, alternative history, comic books and related subjects is known collectively as 'Genre' fiction, and it's the label I'll use for the rest of this article. Partly for the sake of simplicity, and partly out of respect, because fanatical Genre fans are a law unto themselves and I am, frankly, a little scared of them. That said, the Genre crowd are very like the children's book people – a slightly more extreme, mutated version perhaps, but overwhelmingly progressive, good-natured, open-minded and mostly harmless.

In the first part of this year, I attended three very different Genre events:

The Phoenix Convention – Known as P-Con, it is held every year in Dublin. It is a small, informal con that focuses on books. No one dresses up. No one speaks Klingon.

Eastercon: Held in a different venue every Easter – this year in Bradford – it is the largest annual Genre convention in the UK. Its main focus is books, but its interests stretch much wider.

Sci-Fi London: Which is *absolutely not* a convention, according to the organizers, is the leading Genre film festival in the UK. It takes place over the space of a week in the Apollo Cinema in London, but its staff and very active website operate throughout the year.

Let's talk about the costumes, because that's what outsiders or (what some call 'mundanes') conjure up when they think of conventions. Very few people wear costumes – from what I've seen, it tends to be more women than men – and given that the Genre crowd tend to give full rein to their eccentricities, not a lot is thought of it either way. Wearing a costume, or walking round brandishing a medieval weapon, falls into the same category as other funny habits, like being a smoker or a vegan. Whatever you're into. Most aren't into it. Personally, I've never seen anyone in a Star Trek costume. There are photos of Darth Vader and the Star Wars gang greeting people at this year's lavish Sci-Fi London festival, but I think that was just a promotional thing. The Force may have been with us while I was there, but it didn't dress for the occasion.

Steampunk is all the rage – Victorian or Steam Age sci-fi, for those who don't know. At Eastercon, it featured on a few different panels and some had individuals had the costumes to match. Long, lacy dresses and corsets; umbrellas and canes; top hats, three-piece suits and monocles. Steampunk represents a nostalgia for a time when a technological future was still a magical dream. Machinery rather than electronics. Victorian civility and opium den hedonism. Costumes aren't really my thing, but I am a fan of steampunk and am more than happy for women to go round dressed in high boots

and corsets. Vampire romance has a big influence too; the most popular female trends tend to be towards girly goth – pale-skinned, red lips, black everything else . . . but in a cheerful way.

Given the flexible dress code at these things, it's hardly surprising that transvestites feel free to be themselves. For all our society's liberal values, cons are still the only place I've been where a guy with a goatee, heavy metal hair and a studded leather belt can walk around in an elegant pair of stilettos without getting funny looks from somebody – because, frankly, it's just not that weird.

A bit further out on the oddity spectrum are the Beeblebears. A thriving little sub-culture, some of the proud owners of these two-headed, three-armed teddy bears (yes, they are modelled on *Hitch-hiker's Zaphod Beeble-Brox*) held a picnic at Eastercon, where they all sat round and conversed through their cuddly companions.

Even at a sci-fi convention, this was considered a bit strange.

But as I noted before, the ethic at these events is: 'whatever you're into'. Actually, I thought the Beeblebears were quite cool and was sorely tempted to buy one for my baby daughter. Unfortunately, they were only selling them in a size suitable for adults.

All of these things could conceivably feed into the stereotypical image of the Genre fan. But there are plenty of things that don't fit the image and, for me, exemplify what is so attractive about the Genre scene. At P-Con every year, there is a charity auction. Most people donate something, prizes ranging from a Wii console to dog-eared copies of the worst sci-fi books ever written. The presenters turn the whole thing into a game show. At other events, I spotted at least three different people sitting in audiences, knitting as they listened to the panels.

Between the three different venues, I took part in panels or attended talks on, among other things: age-banding; protest literature and the part it has played in British Socialism; biology; role-playing games ('live action' and the vast online epics); small-press publishing; mankind's constant need for fear; medieval history; evolution, and illustration. At a talk on quantum mechanics, I actually began to grasp what the hell it was all about and why it was still so confusing for people who did know what the hell it was all about. At P-Con, I took part in the annual game of Pictionary; boys versus girls.

At Eastercon, I attended a panel discussing what is or is not suitable subject matter for a children's book, where two pre-teenage children were among the speakers and more sat among the audience – something I've never seen at a children's book conference. There were a number of events for children at Eastercon – I helped run one big, messy art workshop – and always space for them to play. Nobody fussed, or tried too hard to contain them. Work and family often went hand-in-hand. Sitting out on the hotel patio, I heard a father demanding to know which one of the kids had stolen his lightsabre.

At P-Con, a session was devoted to the memory of one of the former organizers who had died the year before. People were moved to tears as they took turns standing up and telling stories about him. A short slideshow was played to the tune of 'Always Look On The Bright Side of Life'. Even here, there was an abundance of laughter. Humour pervades every aspect of a con. There's a lot to laugh at and plenty of people to laugh with.

One of the distinctive aspects of Genre cons is that speakers are treated, not as professionals doing a job, but as some higher rank of fan. They are not paid or given expenses – unless they are Guest of Honour – and are rarely asked to speak directly about their work. In some arenas, discussing your work is almost considered bad form, as is bringing books to sell. This is a frustrating feature if you're trying to publicize your latest release, which most creators are. Instead, they are grouped together on panels and given subjects to discuss. This little quirk can result in some offbeat talks, as some people can end up on panels covering subjects they know little about – I was on one at P-Con where I had to talk about the practicalities of a manned mission to Mars. In such a situation, you either have to research quickly or blag wildly, both of which can make for less than predictable, and often entertaining, results. Add in the fact that Genre fans don't make for very passive audiences – there are extremely blurred lines between 'speakers' and 'listeners' – and talks can get pretty animated, veering off in all sorts of directions.

Almost more interesting than the events themselves are the conversations you have with the people while just sitting around, and I love a good conversation. I first learned about the significance of blogging, ebooks, print-on-demand and other fast-growing publishing developments at Genre conventions. The average IQ at these events is, as would be expected, pretty high and progressive thought is the order of the day. In one sitting I had conversations on the pros and cons of modern feminism, the difference between various different types of apple, the lack of support from British socialists for their Northern Irish counterparts during the Troubles and the virtues of a range of alcoholic beverages from vodka to pear cider. The subject matter bounced between the frivolous and the serious like a game of pinball.

Genre fandom is an animal like no other, but I have noticed that the patterns I'd always associated with the Genre crowd are sneaking into the realm of children's books. As I mentioned before, Genre fans are not passive. They take an almost obsessive interest in their favourite stories, often holding events in which professional creators are not required. They create clubs, games, stories and even merchandise based on their favourite books and films. Some creators might rail against this, but these kinds of activities are very rarely aimed at making money and fighting them is, at best, ungrateful and, at worst, counter-productive. Somebody going off and doing their own thing with the content of my stories could irritate me – even if they weren't trying to make money out of it – but then I remember that I did exactly the same thing with my favourite books, films and television programmes when I was a kid. It was done out of love, not out of greed or an attempt to take possession. I wasn't trying to do a runner with it, (So long, and thanks for all the fiction). I was, like the vast majority of fans, mostly harmless.

Genre fans are a boon to the creators they adopt. They were the first to have websites devoted to their passions, the first to blog, to send those addictively entertaining viral emails, the first to use every developing technology to spread word about their favourite creators. They do the marketing for books that publishers often do not. As the book industry strives to create ever narrower categories for its products, we need to break down the bizarre walls of ignorance between genres. Most of the people at Eastercon knew very little about Eoin Colfer, With his usual aplomb, he won them over with the most valued currency at a con: humour. Yet there he was, having just written the sixth *Hitch-hiker* book and it is this, not his own books, for which he will mostly likely be recognized in fandom circles. On the flipside of the coin, most of the children's book crowd – many of whom possess a vast knowledge of literature – have never heard of Neal Stephenson or even Alan Moore. How do such huge divides develop?

There are plenty of reasons not to attend these kinds of conventions. If you are put off by colourful characters; if you are offended by people acting like big kids, or by the prospect of intellectually and emotionally challenging conversations, Genre conventions are not for you. But then you should also probably avoid the Mardi Gras, horse racing and any large football match – or literature festivals, for that matter. If you are not ready to celebrate weirdness and the alternative, to be openly curious about life, the universe and everything or, most importantly of all, just have a good laugh, then it would be best to steer well clear of conventions.

Or you could just go to one and see what it's like. Because if you've never been but find yourself being just a little curious, don't panic. I think you'll discover, well . . . it's life, but not as you know it.