



<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-scifi21jun21,0,6264025,print.s...>
From the Los Angeles Times

COLUMN ONE

In a university not far away, sci-fi heaven

UC Riverside's library of science fiction, fantasy and horror books is the world's largest and a necessary trek for scholars.

By Sara Lin

Times Staff Writer

June 21, 2007

FOR the German monk searching for signs of God in "Star Trek," the obscure storeroom on the fourth floor of UC Riverside's main library was worth the trans-Atlantic pilgrimage.

Bernhard Janzen pored over television scripts and a video clip from "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine," and noticed how an African American space station captain had found a religious stone tablet and, much like Moses, smashed it on the ground as he shepherded an oppressed people toward freedom.

The scene was central to Janzen's dissertation about religious symbolism in the space-age television series.

The monk is among a new breed of scholars flocking to UC Riverside for otherworldly research.

UC Berkeley has the world's premiere collection on Mark Twain — and Yale an unmatched trove of rare medieval manuscripts. But for research on Capt. Kirk, Frankenstein or Harry Potter, nothing tops the 110,000-volume Eaton collection at UC Riverside, the world's largest library of science fiction, fantasy and horror books.

"It's like going to Graceland if you're an Elvis fan," said Drew Morse, a creative writing professor who made the pilgrimage to Riverside from Ohio last summer to study rare poetry by "Fahrenheit 451" author Ray Bradbury.

As appreciation for the literary qualities of science fiction has grown in recent years, the UC Riverside collection has emerged from an academic ghetto. No institution had ever stockpiled science fiction like this, or subjected itself to such an internal clash over the worth of the genre.

Even public libraries had considered the books disposable literature, mainly because early science fiction was published almost exclusively in paperback. But a handful of professors and a librarian at UC Riverside saw something else, and started building.

IN 1969, English professor Robert Gleckner helped the school acquire 7,500 rare science fiction, fantasy and horror novels from an eccentric Bay Area physician, J. Lloyd Eaton. Among them was a first edition of Bram Stoker's "Dracula." Eaton had scribbled plot summaries and succinct criticisms of nearly every book on faded sheets of letterhead.

But Gleckner's colleagues mocked the collection, and he banished the volumes to a storeroom and never touched them again.

And for 10 years, no one paid the books any attention — until UC Riverside's head librarian, Eleanor Montague, found them and cracked open a few. She and comparative literature scholar George Slusser began cooking up an improbable scheme: Science fiction, for all its talk of wormholes and galaxies far, far away was a form of 20th-century American literature that someone ought to keep as a cultural archive.

So in 1979, Montague dubbed Slusser the Eaton collection's first curator.

When he broke the news to friends, they shook their heads and warned him it would be career suicide.

"They told me 'You'd better not touch that, you'll never get tenured,' " Slusser said. "I said 'Hell, I'm going to do it anyway.' "

Slusser went by instinct and started scooping up every new science fiction novel that came out. With less than \$10,000 to work with, he handed hundred-dollar bills to foreign graduate students so they could cart back sci-fi from Russia, Brazil, China and other worldly locales.

Slusser haunted used-book stores and estate sales on his own time. His best finds came from reclusive packrats who had refused to toss their paperbacks. One collector had drained his pool and turned it into underground storage for thousands of science fiction magazines and fan newsletters, including issues of "Amazing Stories," a 1920s-era pamphlet regarded as the world's first science fiction magazine.

All the while, fellow faculty tried to torpedo Slusser's efforts.

English professors went after his funding, arguing to library administrators and English department heads that hoarding collectible James Joyce titles was more important than any featuring Frodo Baggins, Slusser said.

Other professors snickered at him in campus hallways. They even grilled his students during departmental exams: Why not study something more meaningful like feminism or multiculturalism?

"It was guerrilla warfare," Slusser said.

Slusser did win a faculty ally, Jean-Pierre Barricelli, who helped him put on an academic conference in 1979 about science fiction. But their dealings had to be done in secret — "under the counter," Slusser said. About 70 scholars showed up.

Years later, Barricelli became one of Slusser's greatest supporters during his bid for tenure. Barricelli, a scholar on Dante and Leopardi who taught comparative literature, died in 1997.

The conference became an annual event. Attending academics published their papers and helped graduate students win fellowships to pay for their studies at the Eaton collection.

They sponsored a Finnish cosmologist who charted visions of the universe from Dante to the 21st century. An MIT scholar pondered whether comic-book architecture inspired the look of modern cities.

And Janzen, the Capuchin monk from Germany, compared "Star Trek" story lines with modern history and the Bible. The United Federation of Planets, Janzen said, represented an idealized U.S.

"I'm not going to Star Trek conventions and I don't have a Star Trek uniform in my closet, but I'm very interested in concepts of scientific progress and how that affects our day-to-day life and how that changes our notions of being human," said Janzen, 45, who earned his doctorate at UC Riverside in June 2006. "I think science fiction is that genre that deals with those questions."

As word spread about the conferences and the research being done by Slusser's students, more people showed up. Some years, the conferences drew 200 scholars. Slusser's legion of faithful followers were mostly closeted sci-fi fans.

One was Paul Alkon, 71, who bottled up a secret passion for science fiction as a graduate student in Chicago in 1960. He became an expert on 18th-century British writers Samuel Johnson and Daniel Defoe. But once Alkon earned tenure at USC, he started work on a long-anticipated project: a treatise on the origins of futuristic fiction. His book required several research trips to the Eaton collection.

"It's a high-quality collection," Alkon said. "It covers so completely what was written — the bad stuff and the good stuff. You get a picture of what America was like in the 20th century in books."

Slusser dreamed of opening a science fiction studies center and graduate program at the university. In 1982, he sold the idea to then-Chancellor Tomas Rivera, who pledged money and his support. But when Rivera died of a heart attack, plans for the center fizzled. One after the other, Rivera's successors all said the same thing: There wasn't enough money.

Ten years passed, and a battle-weary Slusser grew bitter and depressed. Even Slusser's original ally, the library, eventually turned its back on him, he said. New leadership grew tired of being the sole sponsor behind Slusser's science fiction conferences and cut his funding in 1999. Only the community of sci-fi fans kept them going, cobbling together the \$5,000 Slusser needed for the conference.

To scholars like Alkon and others who had led academic double lives for so long, Slusser was their hero.

"All those years, George was the one-man show that kept the whole thing going — the conferences and the collection," Alkon said.

Even UC Riverside astrophysicists and biologists reached out to Slusser to lend moral support. Many owed their interest in science to futuristic stories they read as children.

Meanwhile, outside the university, something bigger was happening. The entertainment industry began cashing in on science fiction, which had struck a chord with the moviegoing public.

Many of the highest-grossing films of the last 30 years featured science fiction themes: "The Terminator," "Star Wars," "The Matrix."

Recent high-profile Hollywood films, such as "Déjà Vu" and "I, Robot," lifted their story lines from Philip K. Dick and Isaac Asimov, respectively. The "Lord of the Rings" and "Harry Potter" movies spawned cult followings.

The same academicians who thumbed their noses at science fiction began designing classes with titles such as "The Philosophy of The Matrix" or the "The Science of Superheroes."

Within the literary establishment, professional organizations dedicated to the academic study of scientific and fantastic literature sprung to life, while a handful of critical literary journals discussed major works and trends. Scholars now convene regularly at academic conferences — gatherings far more serious than the often satirized fan conventions that attract costume-garbed aficionados.

"It's come of age," said Rosemary G. Feal, executive director of the Modern Language Assn. of America, a professional group for language and literature scholars.

In 2004, the association's flagship journal and one of the most prestigious publications in literary studies, *PLMA*, published an issue that discussed science fiction exclusively.

Science fiction "is sort of at the edge of being canonized," said Georg Gugelberger, 66, UC Riverside professor emeritus of comparative literature. "I'm not the biggest fan. But it's significant. There are people who want to study it, and they should be allowed to."

There's been a change at UC Riverside, too. Six years ago the school hired a new director of special collections, Melissa Conway, who started spending more than half her \$40,000 budget on science fiction acquisitions.

The English department succumbed to "Harry Potter" mania, holding a symposium in 2005. Fans garbed in pointy hats and capes munched on chocolate frogs while listening to professors debate disability and discrimination between non-magical muggles and wizards.

STILL, nearly 30 years of fighting with administrators as well as his own department took its toll on Slusser. He'd done double duty as Eaton collection curator and professor, teaching a full schedule of comparative literature classes and advising doctoral theses.

He retired in 2005 to work on several long-anticipated books about science fiction.

"I just ran out of steam," he said.

The library is still searching for a new curator.

But there's talk about starting the nation's first doctoral program in science fiction studies — and bringing Slusser, now 67, out of retirement to help build it.

He still can't quite believe the change in attitude at the university. When the library invited Slusser back in February to give a lecture about utopian societies in science fiction, they welcomed him with a big cake.

Finally, he said, his colleagues know they have a treasure in the Eaton collection, "and they're going to do something with it."

--