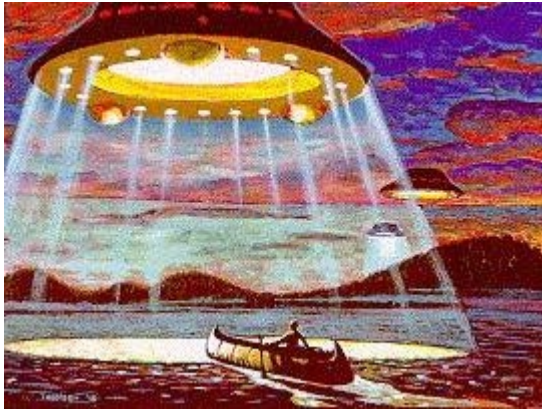


## Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy



**Illustration by Paul Rivoche**

<http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/literature/6/index-e.html>

*Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy* opened at the National Library of Canada (NLC) in Ottawa in May 1995, and a concurrent mini-exhibit was planned for the Merrill Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy facilities in Toronto. This was expected to be a significant literary event and an effective initiative toward reaching important new audiences.

The Library wanted to catalogue their SF collection because science fiction was one of the fastest growing literary genres. The co-developer of the Exhibition, Allan Weiss, had

done extensive research and compiled *A Comprehensive Bibliography of English-Canadian Short Stories* (1988), which encompassed all genres of the Canadian short story including science fiction. He carried out much of his research at the National Library and was very familiar with the resources of the Merrill Collection of Speculative Fiction. The National Library had commissioned an earlier visitor study for a Glenn Gould Exhibition (Filiatrault & Rubenstein, 1991). Findings indicated that the Library's exhibition was attracting "classic" museum-goers, academics and researchers, and that science fiction had the lowest appeal for users of the Library. Since the science fiction collections were attracting a very small group to the Library, the exhibit developers felt that was a reason for doing the CSF Exhibition.

Hugh Spencer was a Senior Consultant at LORD Cultural Resources at the time of *The Canadian Science Fiction Exhibition* project and was responsible for the day to day project administration, media research, and storyline development/interpretation for the Exhibition. Spencer invited me to work on the design of a target visitor survey and focus group interviews, in collaboration with the NLC's Exhibitions and Liaison Officer, Public Programmes and Cultural Events, and the Head of the Merrill Collection. The planning group decided to use front-end analysis because they needed to address key content for the exhibition.

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Feelings, interests, and expectations of users of NLC exhibitions and science fiction (SF) fans and readers were assessed in the front-end evaluation and audience research for the exhibition in 1993 (see also Soren, Lord, & Nicks, 1995; Soren, 2001). A front-end evaluation strategy highlighted potential visitor expectations and images for this type of exhibition. Target visitor questionnaires were distributed to 54 participants, and there were four focus groups in which 25 individuals participated.



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Front-End Evaluation

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## Expectations for The Canadian SF Exhibition

The questionnaire and focus group discussion were used to explore what potential visitors would like to see, do, and learn about in a Canadian SF Exhibition. The NLC setting was to be transformed into a very strong collections-based exhibition that used some of the interactive and discovery-learning techniques pioneered by science centres to animate their collections. In each focus group people expected the type of active, participatory exhibits typical of science museum exhibits.

Specific suggestions for exhibits included:

- \* Access to information such as the genre of SF, and an overview of the field and history of its development ("how long it's been around").
- \* Examples of early modes, the 1980s boom in SF, maps and representations of SF and Fantasy worlds (fictional and universes), directions of current writers, writing techniques and plotlines.
- \* Futuristic means to communicate that are "a call" to the imagination, future developments for the genre, historical items of SF and fandom ("who's done what"), and manuscripts of books, special effects, colour, and bright graphics (e.g., pulp covers).
- \* "More real than fiction" exhibits (e.g., Canada's role in space, space habitats), hands on stuff, easily accessible items to draw in the uninitiated, memorabilia displays (e.g., pictures of conventions, obscure trivia), science-oriented and informative displays, slides and visual material in astronomy computer exhibits, and art and costuming displays showing how "life imitates art."

A **Merril Collection Friends focus group** represented SF Readers who actively use an SF library in Toronto and have a quite sophisticated knowledge of SF and the Canadian SF community. This group felt strongly that the greater the emphasis on the written work, the more adult in orientation the exhibition would be. If it was more graphic/visual or interactive, and there was a strong focus on TV and film, animal fantasy, graphic novels and comics, the exhibition would be of greater appeal to younger audiences. There should be:

- \* Models and dioramas of future and fantasy settings from SF.
- \* Kids' activities, such as, "build their own future" (e.g., with space Lego), and representations of the importance of place and structures to SF stories (what would it be like to live in ...?), perhaps in a workroom off to the side.
- \* SF art and poster displays because SF has a strong visual tradition, and visual and colourful displays (e.g., gold book covers).
- \* A performing space for a movie festival, plays ("kids love plays"), and authors readings ("a reason to hang around on weekends").

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An **Ad Astra focus group** was representative of a classic, grass-roots SF fan/enthusiast group, with a broad interest in different forms and expressions of SF. This group believed that the exhibition could attract all ages with lots of interactivity. They envisioned:

- \* Live programming to support the exhibits, such as SF writers workshops, “meet the creators,” and “create your own SF art” with an artist on hand.
- \* Displays with great SF costumes, SF and fan collectibles, and old publications and fanzines.
- \* A room where various groups could talk to the public and clubs, groups, and conventions could advertise.
- \* A computer programme like an SF simulated city, or different societies taken from SF set up and visitors put through different scenarios to see how societies develop.
- \* Introductory multimedia walkthrough experiences to enable visitors to see two authors develop different sides of the same story, and compare the stories with their own.
- \* Events and characteristics that made Canadian fandom unique, since many fans are not even aware of these.

Individuals in a **National Library of Canada users group** actively used the NLC and attended its exhibitions. People in this focus group felt that SF is a very attractive subject - more colourful than most exhibits at the Library. They, themselves, said that they would be interested in learning about SF plots and structure and were curious, as non fans, about how ideas were developed using advanced technologies. People suggested:

- \* A futuristic workstation on a space ship, which could be done simplistically with a space environment and another world around each bump.
- \* A theatre for acting out SF on a podium or a stage with imaginary, futuristic scenery; part of the exercise could be to use imagination to see behind the backdrops.
- \* A play that could be written out and read, and should be very visual.
- \* A software producer or company could be challenged to create multi media displays using "smart technologies" so that, for instance, lights would turn on when someone entered the space. Images, words, or movies could be called up if laser discs and CD-ROMs were used and would allow bigger access to a variety of short selections. For example, there could be a scene in *Mario Brothers* in which visitors could create a combination of words and images, and print out their story at the end.

The fourth focus group was an interesting combination of **Ottawa area SF fans and readers**. This was a very well read and reflective group of individuals who had interests in a variety of SF media and were avid convention organizers and attenders. They had quite different ideas, such as:

- \* Using a three-dimensional sculptural object, like a flying saucer with an ordinary (Illinois) license plate that could be parked out in front of the NLC for those who know SF (from Michael Rennie’s radio broadcast, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, n.d.).
- \* A time-line developed related to what was written and when it happened (e.g., in 1969, birth control implants, home computers).

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- \* Scientists could speak on space travel, DNA research, and virtual reality.
- \* Visual images attract, toys and games are popular (to feel like "I'm a child again"), and art pieces should be displayed.
- \* Canadian SF TV shows like *Prisoners of Gravity*, an analysis of *The Starlost* or *War of the Worlds*, and videos of costume shows and masquerades.
- \* Saturday morning activities for kids could include build your own robot, alien or starship, and teens (13-16 year olds) could build a film set, or act out characters (e.g. Superman, not a Star Trekker).
- \* In display cases, old books and fanzines, photos of more notable writers and artist promoters.
- \* Music should be continuously playing in the background (e.g., Crash test dummies, electronic music, "filkers" or SF folk singers), and there could be a name-that-song contest related to SF songs in the media and movies in Canada (e.g., in *Superman*).

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### Images of Canadian SF, Fantasy, Canadian Literature, and the NLC

In visitor studies across museum settings, one of my research interests has been to explore prior understandings through the images that people have brought with them to their experience in a museum, and connections individuals make during a visit. Ideally, visitors have experiences in a museum in which they are able to make a strong connection with an object, idea, or phenomenon. After their visit, they may encounter something that looks, feels, sounds like, or reminds them of the connection they made in the museum. The later association may help them to genuinely understand the concept or principle related to their museum experience. The original connection has likely made them curious to know more; an image they take away from the museum may keep the idea alive for awhile as an intuitive understanding; and a later associated experience may be the final "aha" (see also, Soren, 2000).

- \* Images of Canadian science fiction for individuals in each group except the Merrill Collection Friends were: Futuristic, interstellar time travel, space travel in starships or spaceships, future science, cyberpunk, UFO's, robots, aliens, mutants, sexy women, and classic 1950s flying saucers.
- \* Generally, SF was thought to be associated with alternate reality, advanced social structures, and "high tech in the street."
- \* In contrast to the SF world of space travel and aliens, Fantasy "goes beyond the boundaries of reality, encompassing things that can never be," one Ottawa SF fan/reader explained. Associated with Fantasy are elves and unicorns, half humans, pixies, the Sidhe, mythical creatures, dragons, magic, and swords and sorcery - all creations of the "fanciful imagination." Fantasy was considered to be entertaining, but totally improbable fiction that has a magical, non-technical slant. The Fantasy world was described as one that is "faint and far - the horns of elfland blowing," and "a picture of ideal and unreal worlds." In Fantasy one can be wonderfully transported out of reality by dreams and magic, fairies and witches, sorcery or psionics, the Sidhe, trolls, barbarians, and "men and women with long hair, little clothing, armed with spears and not smiling much."

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Canadian literature tended to be perceived as serious and heavy, elitist and arrogant, introspective and depressing, often reflective and questioning. It was described by an SF reader as "anything good written by Canadians, preferably although not necessarily set in Canada." An Ottawa SF fan/reader commented that stories "explore both the inner and outer life of Canadians." Characterization is more important than plot, and Canadian literature tends to be more literary than commercial. An Ad Astra member thought of Canadian authors as thinking persons writing about "distance - a feeling of being shut out" and survival. A lack of publicity means that people are not aware of Canadian literature; it is a government financed art. In contrast, people in focus groups used the words "very good," "cutting edge," "inventive," and "interesting" to describe Canadian SF authors.

The National Library of Canada was associated with a depository of Canadian work, national documents, government papers, legal documents, the Canadian "Library of Congress," the Government Department that keeps all Canadian literature (e.g., manuscripts and books), and a national archives (rather than "a living collection") in Ottawa. A library was thought to house books, history, geography, and bookworms. It was "a place where they store old books," which is very quiet and peaceful, "a good place to spend a couple of years reading." A few even considered the National Library to be a boring place with bad air and dusty books, not often heard of and out of the way.

Images of the venue for this exhibition indicated that the NLC was an unlikely place for an SF fan or reader to frequent. In Doering and Pekarik's terms (1997), people's expectations for an SF exhibition were likely to clash with their "entrance narrative" of what an exhibition would be like that was housed at the NLC. However, the exhibition had the potential for transforming the bookish and dusty image of the NLC to one that was dynamic with lights, colour, interactive and social experiences where people could use their imaginations and senses. Furthermore, The Canadian SF Exhibition could help to transform the public's perceived image of SF fans and readers from "weird trekkies" to creative people who have something important to say about socio-technological projections and fantasy worlds. SF can sometimes be useful escape as we try to survive in difficult times. The Exhibition could also demonstrate to its visiting publics that not all Canadian literature is serious and heavy, deeply introspective and depressing; but rather at the cutting edge, inventive and interesting, and that there is a unique Canadian SF genre.

This front-end evaluation for *The Canadian Science Fiction Exhibition* was intended to inform the development of exhibits and programs so that they would appeal to the interests of a variety of specialist and enthusiast audiences -- from academics to Star Trek fans.

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### Responding to Images through Exhibit Design

I interviewed Spencer to determine the usefulness of the front-end study and its impact on exhibit development five years after our front-end study project (June 1998). The audience research was important because the planning group felt that there was "likely a much larger audience out there that the Library could tap into." There was concern about the reputation of the Library, and they wanted to know how to reach people and how to present the NLC's

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contribution to culture. If the front-end analysis had come up with an extremely negative reaction to the show, it could have terminated the project. As Spencer explained, the audience research helped to decide if the Exhibition was “yes/no; go/no go.”

Spencer explained how this front-end audience research impacted on the design for the *Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

*I was very pleased with just about every aspect of the study - the methodology, the selection of people, the facilitation, and discussion. I liked the results a lot. The NLC had wanted the literary collection behind the show to be very prominent, as well as popular culture and media that the Library doesn't collect. We wanted to get that balance right.*

*We made some changes to the exhibition - we wanted to include media as a result of the study. We found out that media was very important to SF fans and readers (e.g, cartoons were a good idea - that was very helpful). We put more material from film and TV - seeing the Canadian element was important. We had a thematic approach to the Exhibition. We included some of the things that had come up in focus groups, like space travel - I was not that keen on space travel as it had been done quite often before. There were a couple of stranger things from some ideas they gave us. One of them was putting the flying saucer out on the front lawn of the Library. We got a big rocket ship instead; a prop house donated it and we paid shipping costs. It was interesting that it wasn't the SF fans but the readers who suggested this. We didn't get into Cronenberg film as much as I thought we would; he didn't get prominently mentioned.*

Some interesting things that came out of the focus groups were the arts content people wanted to see in the show and not wanting themselves to be seen as eccentrics and weirdos - elevating the public's images of what SF fans and reader are like ...

*The audience research answered one of the basic questions the National Library had, which was that there was an important connection between the setting (i.e., the institution's collection) and the theme (validating the NLC's interest in science fiction). One of the things we really held back on was, "Look at the wacky fans." The media always portrays SF that way and we didn't do any of that. Costuming and fan material was treated with respect. There was a section called the Audience that dealt with fan publications and memorabilia. We tried not to talk down to the audience. We didn't have anything excessively academic. It was a fairly adult, mature approach. We found that the material itself, the analysis, would be interesting and have their attention. It wasn't, "Let's do something intelligent." A competing bid had a very different approach - wacky and strange. Our approach was a little more subdued. We didn't want the exhibitry to compete and abandoned a designer's attempt to be garish.*

*We wanted it to look a little futuristic. There was a section of media as you walked in - we wanted people to come in from outside and transport themselves. There were clippings, SF productions, various models, a big figure in a book (from a production of *The Tempest*), and a strange manuscript from the 1890s. The motif of the exhibition catalogue was a copper cover, which was an allusion to the first Canadian SF novel, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* [Anonymous (by De Mille), 1888; cited in Bleiler, 1948]. We featured a lot of animation art and illustration that was more art-oriented, and some hands-on opportunities for the arts like, the Create Your Own SF Comic Book Area.*

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A spin-off of the Exhibition was that Allarcom Pay Television used Spencer as a creative and cultural consultant, for instance when a new specialty SF channel was being developed. CBC Radio interviewed him on *The Arts Tonight* and *Morningside* for the cultural and historical significance of Canadian SF, including how we celebrate Hallowe'en (*Morningside*, October 31, 1997). Spencer felt that the methodology for the audience research would also be of interest to people working in urban planning, tourism, recreation, media, advertising, and planners involved with curriculum-based programming who wanted to know "if they were getting through" (e.g., youth groups, Sunday school teachers). Spencer uses this front-end audience research as a model when he teaches about exhibit development.

The planning group for *Out of This World: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy* did not do any evaluation beyond the front-end audience research. The National Library had a Visitor Comments book and did some of their own evaluation. The SF community acknowledged the importance of the Exhibition with a nomination for the Aurora Award by SF Canada, the country's leading professional SF writers' association. Spencer was pleased with the nomination and felt that the Exhibition and its catalogue were critically well received.

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