

## CENTERING SCIENCE FICTION

Last month, I promised to follow up my editorial on one of the roads not taken in my life with an editorial about the Center for the Study of Science Fiction. The Center serves as an umbrella for a variety of science fiction programs available at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Although officially founded in 1982 by James Gunn, the CSSF actually traces its beginnings back to 1970. That was when Jim's first course in science fiction was offered at KU. Those early courses are the ones I longed to enroll in as a graduating high school senior. While I'm sure they would have been wonderful, the diversity of programs at KU has exploded in the intervening years.

The Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction was launched in 1975 and became an annual event in 1977. In the early days, Jim brought in three visiting writers: Gordon R. Dickson, Theodore Sturgeon, and Frederik Pohl, and they became fixed parts of the program for a number of years. In 1985, Jim, with Fred as a visiting author, began offering an intensive writers workshop.

The Center, which had begun presenting the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for the best SF novel of the year at the first annual Campbell Conference and Awards Banquet in 1979, added the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for the best short story to its roster in 1987. In 1996, the Kansas City Science Fiction and Fantasy Society and the CSSF created the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

In 2004, The Hall of Fame moved to the EMP Museum in Seattle, Washington, but the Center continued to foment new ideas and programs. In 2005, the Center started AboutSF, "a resource to help educators and librarians better understand and teach science fiction." This educational outreach program offers reading



guides, teaching kits, and sample projects. It provides a conduit for finding guest speakers and links to lectures and interviews, as well as a myriad of other helpful tools. Benjamin Cartwright, a Ph.D. candidate at KU, is the program's current coordinator. Information on this invaluable program can be found at [Aboutsf.com](http://Aboutsf.com).

The English and technical writing departments continue to offer semester-long courses in science fiction. The intensive science fiction literature course, which is invaluable to students of science fiction and academics who intend to teach courses about SF, is now a two-week course that runs on either side of the Campbell conference. The yearly focus alternates between the novel and the short story, but beginning in 2012, the Institute will also be available as a full-semester course, alternating with the prior summer's SF Institute topic. This means that while the 2012 Institute's summer focus will be on the novel, the fall course will be on the short story.

In the summer of 2013, the intensive course will be about the short story and the fall course will concentrate on the novel. This course is also available on-line for teachers who cannot attend the class on campus.

July is a hot month for SF in Kansas. Although James Gunn retired from directing the short story workshop in 2010, he still drops in to “meet with workshopers and offer words of writing wisdom.” Chris McKitterick, an author and one of Jim’s former students, began co-teaching the workshop in 1996. He is now the director of the CSSF. Chris teaches many of the courses on SF at KU and he and guest author Bradley C. Denton lead the workshop. Another former student of Jim’s is the Nebula- and Hugo-Award-winning author Kij Johnson. Kij co-taught the workshop from 1996 until 2002. Since 2002, she has offered her own science fiction and fantasy novel writers workshop during the same two-week period.

KU’s bookstore, Jayhawk Ink, gets into the act with their annual Sci Fi July Book Signings and Readings. Visitors can have works signed by noted authors and editors and then stick around for three or four hours of invigorating readings. The event is free and open to the public. This summer, readers presented some of the works of Frederik Pohl. The affair’s exquisite poster, which incorporated classic art from an old SF magazine cover, was designed by Laura Fisk.

I got a taste of what was going on in Lawrence during my visit to the Campbell Conference, but more information about these classes, workshops, and events can be found at [sfcenter.ku.edu](http://sfcenter.ku.edu). Anyone familiar with the science fiction field knows that there are a number of terrific writers workshops. Still, it’s remarkable to think that most of the exciting activity at the University of Kansas owes its inception to one man’s vision and dedication. Science fiction is richer for James Gunn’s guiding influence, and I was lucky that I had the chance to spend some time with him this summer and to see firsthand the world that he has set in motion. ○