Science Fiction, Canada, and I **Nicholas Ruddick**

This piece, here slightly revised, was originally presented orally as my Keynote Address as Scholar Guest of Honour at the Academic Conference on Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy (ACCSFF), at York University, Toronto, 8-9 June 2024.

I've lived in Canada for more than fifty years. I was 21 when I landed at circular Terminal 1 at Toronto International Airport in September 1974. Pierre Trudeau was Prime Minister and the unity of this country was in danger from Québec separatism. Richard Nixon had just resigned from the US Presidency in the aftermath of Watergate. American involvement in Vietnam was not going well. Montréal was the largest city in Canada. My destination was Hamilton, where the steel industry was booming and the city's east end was swathed in sulphurous smog.

I intended to stay for a year in Canada to do an MA at McMaster University, where graduate school was full of US draft dodgers. More than half a century later, I'm still here. So I'm an immigrant, albeit a white, male, anglophone one. But like the vast majority of immigrants to this country, I worked hard, wanting to fit in and make good. I suppose I have. Yet it took me a long time to acknowledge my debt to Canada. In my first years here I used my displaced status to reflect on British and American culture. Eventually, though, I came to appreciate which side my bread was buttered on.

I was never a science fiction (sf) fan when I was young. I read widely and without generic preference. When I was about ten, one of my favourite books was an H.G. Wells collection published by Penguin in 1946: *The Time Machine and Other Stories*. The story in it that gripped

me most was “The Door in the Wall.” A motherless child in London gets lost and wanders through a door in a wall into an unfallen Eden with gentle panthers. He spends the next forty years trying unsuccessfully to rediscover that elusive door. Then his corpse is discovered: he’d fallen through an opening in a fence surrounding a deep excavation. As a child I felt the magnetic appeal of this door, though I couldn’t have told you why. Later I understood that it was an escape hatch from the adult world of responsibility. Now I feel that the story also warns of the danger of living in an idealized past. As genres, fantasy and sf are lumped together by the publishing industry, but actually it’s a forced marriage of opposites. Fantasy is retrospective and nostalgic; sf is forward facing and anxious ... understandably so.

When I was a child we didn’t have a TV at home, and so I’d go to my grandmother’s if there was anything special I wanted to watch. Two shows drew me powerfully, both of them sf. The first was a six-part series called *The Big Pull*. It’s listed on IMDb as “one of the great ‘Lost Gems’ of television science fiction.” It was a very dark scenario for a kids’ show on the BBC in 1962. A pair of astronauts leave Earth but only one returns, as a sort of composite of both. Earth is unwittingly caught in a cosmic battle between powerful alien forces, and it doesn’t end well. Apparently the tapes of this show were lost. I’m sure it turned thousands of little British kids on to sf ... or scared them off it for life.

On Saturday 23 November 1963, I was glued to my grandmother’s sofa for the first episode of *Doctor Who*. It was the day after the Kennedy assassination, and the episode was repeated the following week as a lot of people, caught up in the dreadful news from America, had missed it. I watched the early seasons, with the ill-tempered William Hartnell and then the kindlier Patrick Troughton as the first two Doctors. The opening music by the BBC Radiophonic

workshop produced a chill of excitement down my spine. It anticipated Pink Floyd by several years, and for me it's sf's signature tune.

In May 1968 I heard intriguing things about a film just released. One day, afternoon classes at my school were cancelled, so on my way home I went to the Theatre Royal Cinerama in downtown Manchester. Cinerama was a widescreen process using three projectors to throw an image on a huge, concave screen. From the opening scenes of human prehistory through to the manifestation of the Star Child I sat entranced. The film flung open the doors of perception like a hallucinogenic drug. I had no ability to process rationally what I saw, but when I staggered out into the spring sunlight I knew that it was of momentous importance. To this day, Kubrick's masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey* remains my touchstone of sf cinema.

Although I enjoyed sf, my first love in literature was poetry. My BA was in English at the University of London. The course was incredibly old-fashioned: Old English, Middle English, and no literature later than 1880. So I came to McMaster with the intention of studying modern literature and writing a master's thesis on Sylvia Plath. There I discovered American poetry and met my wife-to-be. Britt is Swedish, and both of us were reluctant to return to our native countries. Canada was neutral territory where we would make a new life together. I stayed on at Mac and wrote a PhD thesis on Emily Dickinson. I had little intention of becoming an academic, but by then we were expecting a baby, which concentrates the mind wonderfully, as Dr. Johnson said of another kind of impending event.

It was a time of growing Canadian nationalism, and there were few jobs for American literature specialists. Still, I applied, and got a one-year term position at the University of New Brunswick, Saint John campus. I was hired as the sabbatical replacement for the prof who

taught the sf course. I'd got the job because, unlike the other new doctorates who applied, I had sf teaching experience. As a grad student at Mac I'd TA'd a course in sf. Almost all the assigned texts had been new to me, and I'd read them with interest but frequent bafflement, as I had a limited grasp of sf reading protocols. The novels included *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Childhood's End*, and *The Man in the High Castle*. All the students in that sf course were male, and many of them were fans who'd read much more sf than me. I had my work cut out to keep one step ahead of them.

UNBSJ was tiny in those days, but its Ward Chipman Library had an extensive sf collection. Sadly, this resource is now a shadow of its former self, a reflection of the low esteem that sf is still held in Canada. I gave the introductory address at the New Brunswick Science Fiction Convention in Saint John in April 1981. The Guest of Honour was Barry B. Longyear, who lived over the border in Maine. His novella *Enemy Mine* had just won a Hugo and a Nebula, and he'd got the 1980 Campbell Award for best new writer. He seemed put out that the New Brunswick Convention had no more than thirty attendees and was introduced by a complete nonentity – myself.

Having taught sf at UNBSJ was useful when it came to applying for a tenure-track job in American lit. at the University of Regina. For their ad indicated a second field in "popular literature" would be advantageous. I didn't know it then, but the U of R was actually looking for someone to teach sf; they just couldn't bring themselves to put this in the ad. There was a bit of a sf tradition in Regina. The pioneering fan Susan Wood had settled there briefly before moving on to BC. And Leland Sapiro, the prickly editor of the academic fanzine *Riverside Quarterly*, had

taught sf as a sessional at what was then the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus during the sixties and early seventies.

Incredible as it will probably seem to current grad students, I was hired into a tenurable position in Regina with zero publications and zero papers presented at conferences. While grad school at McMaster had involved lots of teaching and marking, no effort had been made to prepare us to join the profession as researchers. Fortunately for me, the U of R was wet behind the ears. It had became an autonomous university on 1 July 1974, only a couple of months before I'd arrived in Canada. As a new university it had no tradition of scholarship, and the existing faculty had no wish to be shown up by well-published new hires. Still, things were rapidly changing, and I soon realised that publication was the key to success in academia.

I was working on articles on Emily Dickinson and Robert Lowell when I started at Regina in 1982. Enrolment in my American poetry classes was pitiful, but my sf courses filled up quickly. There's nothing like teaching enthusiastic students to expand one's commitment to a subject. But what turned me into a sf scholar was my excitement about the texts I taught. Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* blew me away and was the subject of my first sf article. When it was accepted for the March 1985 issue of *Science Fiction Studies*, the top journal in the field, I knew I was on the right track. I concluded my piece by arguing that the mysterious alien ship Rama would never return to our solar system. Of course, there were three subsequent *Rama* sequels, so I learnt the hard way that it isn't the sf critic's job, any more than it's the sf writer's, to predict the future.

At this time I came across the Call for Papers for the newly established International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts (ICFA). Without any real understanding of what "The

Fantastic" meant, I saw that this conference covered the kind of writing I liked. Ignorant of submission protocols, I sent in two proposals, one on Poe and one on Emily Dickinson. Both were accepted. I flew to Boca Raton, Florida and there I found my academic kindred spirits.

ICFA attracted major fantasy and sf writers who, used to condescension from the mainstream literary establishment, enjoyed the serious attention of us maverick academics. In 1983 I met Brian Aldiss, who became a permanent guest of the conference and a mentor over my early career. Among other sf titans in attendance were Frederik Pohl, Gene Wolfe, Kate Wilhelm ... and Harlan Ellison, who was GOH. Unlike almost all eminent sf writers, Ellison was ... well, he spent his keynote viciously berating a female reporter in the audience who'd made the mistake of referring to him as a "sci-fi" writer. And I met many fellow academics for the first time, some of whom became good friends. One of the few other Canadians there was David Ketterer of Concordia University, a British expat like myself. He'd publish his pioneering book on Canadian sf a decade later.

We younger academics at ICFA felt we had a lot in common. We were doing original work promoting unfairly disparaged literature, rather than over-quarrying the usual suspects like Joyce, Woolf, and Henry James. And we often felt like renegades in departments that didn't take our fields seriously. Moreover, all this was taking place during the theory boom of the early 1980s. Skeptical of the value of applying Derrida or Lacan to literary works in the first place, we at ICFA could sidestep arid theoretical confrontations by focusing on more engaging questions. What exactly was fantastic literature? Why was it worth studying? I'd spend most of my career trying to avoid "theory." That term I still believe is specious, a craven attempt to raise literary

studies to the privileged status of a science. Nevertheless, at the start of my career I cravenly name-dropped "theoreticians" in my articles so as to be published in major journals.

At that time, Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* was the chief theoretical study in our field. His idea of the fantastic was the reader's hesitation before deciding whether a fictional event was uncanny or marvellous. This "theory" was far too narrow to illuminate 95% of the works that ICFA focused on. About sf, which dealt with phenomena like time travel as though they were realistic and rational, well, Todorov had little to say. Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* was beginning to cast its spell over sf studies. It applied a welcome philosophical rigour to the field, but to me his "cognitive estrangement" was equally a feature of mainstream literature that had an "alien" setting and a subversive thrust, such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

These early ICFAs were dominated by the intimidating figure of Marshall Tymn, the leading sf bibliographer. Only the chosen few were invited for evening drinks to his penthouse suite in the conference Hilton. I attended ICFA yearly and evidently Marshall noted my enthusiasm. In 1988 he appointed me head of the Science Fiction Division of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts (IAFA), the scholarly society that ran ICFA. My Division was one of seven that covered every aspect of the Fantastic. I was now responsible for choosing and assembling all the papers on sf submitted to the conference's academic program. I was the only Canadian in the IAFA administration.

At the 10th ICFA in 1989, GOH was Doris Lessing, who'd recently published a quintet of Sufi-inflected soft sf novels. Suffice it to say, it wasn't this part of her oeuvre that earned her the Nobel Prize in 2007. I was asked to interview her by the editor of *Wascana Review*, the

University of Regina's literary magazine. While the tape recorder was running Lessing proved an extremely touchy interviewee. She chastised me for asking about her political, social, and sexual views. She told me that as a mere louse in the locks of literature I should cultivate humility. She refused to say a word about the Rushdie *fatwa* then making the international news. Yet as soon as I shut the tape recorder off, she became charming and we had a delightful talk.

The contemporary sf writer whose work attracted me most at that time was Christopher Priest. In 1983 he'd been chosen as one of *Granta*'s Best of Young British Writers, along with Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, et al. In 1979 Priest had declared his independence from sf, calling its post-*Star Wars* popularity an expansion of fatty tissue rather than a hardening of muscular flesh. His radical stance appealed to me and I proposed a book on Priest in the Starmont House series of monographs on individual sf authors. I argued that his refusal to be bound by generic constraints had led to a great improvement in his work.

When the book finally came out, three years after I'd submitted the manuscript, the British sf journal *Foundation* couldn't find anyone with sufficient knowledge of Priest's oeuvre to review it, so they asked Priest himself. The result was very interesting. R.D. Mullen in *Science Fiction Studies* called it "the finest self-critique of an SF author known to me." I planned another Starmont Guide on Keith Roberts, the author of *Pavane*, an outstanding alternate history story collection. Like Priest, he was a writer who'd received almost no serious critical attention. But I decided against it when it became obvious that, due to the failing health of Starmont's publisher, it was unlikely ever to see print. So I wrote three articles on each of Roberts's major works and published them in the British academic sf periodical *Foundation*. Roberts died in 2000 and Priest died in 2024. Neither deserves to be forgotten.

There were many downsides to living in remote Regina, but my university was very supportive of my turn to sf. In early 1984, they encouraged me to host a TV series on the local cable channel. It was my three-hour evening sf course videotaped, with nonexistent production values and bored cameramen focused on students yawning and picking their noses. The following year, I hosted ten thirty-minute TV programs on sf for general interest. Working on this show greatly improved my knowledge of the history of sf, as well as my presentation skills. Subsequently I became for a time a frequent media guest. On CBC's *What on Earth?*, for example, I presented my three favourite sf novels. And having gained from ICFA some understanding of the larger field, I taught my first grad course in fantastic literature in 1987, assigning fiction by Poe, Wells, Kafka, Borges, and Angela Carter.

Regina was not the easiest place in which to conduct an academic career with ambitions beyond the vast, unpeopled, encircling prairie horizon. In March 1986 ICFA was held in Houston, Texas. To fly there from Regina via Toronto was prohibitively expensive. Our old Impala was too dodgy for winter travel on the prairie, so I rented a car, drove 4½ hours to Minot, North Dakota, and flew on a cut-price US airline to Houston. The going went smoothly, but the return was another story. I landed in Minot at 10:00 pm on Sunday. I filled the tank to the brim at the airport as no gas stations would be open on the unpopulated prairie roads. I'd made it to Minot on a single tank so I was confident that I'd make it back to Regina. But I didn't: thanks to strong headwinds the car ran out of gas twelve miles short. At three in the morning I trudged through a blizzard to a nearby farmhouse and woke the farmer, who let me use his phone to call the Canadian Automobile Association. Eventually a CAA tow truck arrived, but the driver hadn't got the message to bring spare gas with him. We siphoned a pint or two from his tank, but then his

truck wouldn't start. I got home on fumes, leaving the tow truck guy waiting to be rescued by his CAA colleagues.

In 1989 Marshall Tymn was in a car accident and suffered a traumatic brain injury that confined him to a wheelchair. It was shocking to see such a dynamic character laid so low. Though I usually shirked major administrative responsibilities, I felt a duty to ensure the continuance of Marshall's legacy. I became Vice-President of IAFA from 1992-95 – Chip Sullivan was president. My chief duty was to oversee the academic program of the conference, by then the largest of its kind in the world. During this period we entertained many leading sf writers, like Orson Scott Card, Joe Haldeman, and Ursula Le Guin. Chip and I were excited when Angela Carter, a writer we both revered, accepted our invitation to be ICFA GOH in 1992. We were very disappointed when she suddenly backed out without explanation in late 1991. Then the news broke in February 1992 that she had died of cancer aged only 51.

My first big research project was on British sf. Brian Stableford (who had been four years ahead of me at Manchester Grammar School and who died in 2024) had identified "scientific romance" as a British literary tradition stemming from H.G. Wells. Brian claimed it had developed earlier and entirely independently of American sf, which sprang from the pulp writings of Hugo Gernsback. In contrast, I felt that the British and American sf traditions had fused before WWII. I also wanted to show that the dominant tropes of scientific romance continued in the work of the British New Wave sf writers like J.G. Ballard. This was the subject of my book *Ultimate Island: On the Nature of British SF* (1993). In preparation, I compiled a bibliography of every work, starting with More's *Utopia* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that I felt had contributed to the British sf *field*. This became a separate book, *British SF: A Chronology*

1478-1990 (1992). By "field," I meant sf as it was broadly defined by Peter Nicholls's and John Clute's original *Encyclopedia of SF*, not narrowly by Darko Suvin.

I edited the ICFA conference volume in 1990, entitled *State of the Fantastic*. The submitted essays had been written as papers for oral delivery. It's standard editorial practice to give contributors to this kind of critical anthology a deadline to rewrite their pieces so as to make them more scholarly. But conference volumes from the previous few years still hadn't appeared thanks to dilatory editors. So to get things moving, I rigorously edited and in some cases rewrote all the submissions that needed upgrading. And to encourage Canadian sf scholars, I included pieces by Québec sf novelist Élisabeth Vonarburg, by Veronica Hollinger of Trent University, and by several surprised grad students at Canadian universities. The anthology appeared in record time, was very well reviewed, and not a single contributor complained that I had altered their text without their permission.

In 1995 I was fingered as the next president of IAFA, but declined. My university had hitherto supported me loyally, but it didn't have the resources to fund what I'd have needed to run a large international scholarly association from Regina, namely fulltime secretarial assistance and course relief. And Canadian funding agencies like the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) were no help. I'd applied to them for international travel funding to IAFA Board meetings, but they'd turned me down. Their rule was that such international Boards had to contain members from three different countries. I pointed out that while our Board was chiefly American, I was Canadian and one of our members was Puerto Rican. But SSHRC responded that Puerto Rico counted as the USA, so I was out of luck.

I never received a cent from SSHRC during my academic career. In the end I stopped applying to them, figuring they were prejudiced against sf researchers. But frankly I didn't need any major grants, as my university was quite willing to reimburse me for travel to, say, the Science Fiction Foundation Library at the North-East London Polytechnic, then the main research centre for British sf. There I discovered that Canada wasn't alone in its low opinion of academic sf research. When that Poly became a University, it was decided that the cost of employing one half-time librarian to oversee the Foundation's sf collection, the largest in the UK, was too great. They were about to donate the entire collection to Japan for nothing, when the University of Liverpool stepped in. It acquired the UK's primary sf research collection for just the cost of transporting it to Liverpool, and that's where it is today.

In the later 1990s I decided that, rather than spend the rest of my academic career struggling to validate sf as an academic subject, I'd move into the mainstream. I began work on a book on the 1890s, with the idea of contrasting the Victorian fin de siècle with the countdown to Y2K. I focused on the period 1890-91, years that I believed were key to understanding the transition from the Victorian to the modernist mindset. But academic presses objected to the narrow temporal focus of my manuscript. Of course, this was long before the spate of books on a single year – *1922: Modernism Year One*; *1968: The Year That Rocked the World*, etc. In the end I published a few chapters as individual articles. One was on the first electrical execution, another on the meeting of solo global circumnavigator Nellie Bly with Jules Verne. My brief secession from sf wasn't very successful, though it did broaden my horizons. And it led to the commission of one of my most cited pieces, the "Fantastic Fiction" chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*.

How best to resume my sf career? At the turn of the millennium, Broadview Press, the Canadian publisher of annotated university editions of literary texts, had put out a well-regarded edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. I proposed to them an edition of what I saw as sf's central text, H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. In those days Broadview publisher Don Le Pan, based in Calgary, would pass through Regina periodically, and we developed a good relationship. My edition of the Wells classic came out in 2001, was well promoted by Broadview, and has sold over 17,000 copies. Its success led to Broadview putting out the other major Wells scientific romances, as well as such important proto-sf as *The Coming Race*, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*, and *Flatland*. By 2016 I was able to teach a graduate class in early sf using only Broadview Editions.

In the late 1990s I saw Michael Frayn's play *Copenhagen* in London. A dialogue between three historical characters – Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, and Bohr's wife Margrethe – it's an inspired application of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics to historical events. Heisenberg was in charge of the Nazi nuclear program. He claimed after the war that he'd thwarted the program by deliberately overestimating the amount of Uranium-235 required to build a bomb. Was he a hero or simply a master of post hoc self-justification? It struck me that this play was a model of how the theatre might dramatize hard science. Hugh Whitmore's *Breaking the Code*, about the cryptographer Alan Turing, was almost as good. So in 2000 I wrote an article evaluating these and the handful of other contemporary "science plays." Since then there have been many notable science plays, a good Canadian example being Vern Thiessen's *Einstein's Gift*.

My first major involvement with Canadian sf came in 1997 when I was asked to write a chapter in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* on Grant Allen. Who? you might ask. Well, Allen, born 1848 in Kingston, then in pre-Confederation Canada West, was one of the most important precursors of H.G. Wells in scientific romance. In fact, Wells wrote Allen a letter expressing his sincere debt, and namechecks him in *The Time Machine*, this after panning Allen's best-seller *The Woman Who Did*. This was the 1895 bestselling novel about a woman who refuses to marry the father of her child because she feels, correctly, that the marriage vow required her subservience to her husband. Of course, things end badly for her, and her fate continues to divide feminist critics even today. I felt a strong identification with Allen and I edited *The Woman Who Did* for Broadview to defend his important plea for women's rights that had been badly misunderstood for more than a century. And more recently, I assembled the Oxford Bibliography on Grant Allen, not a small task as he wrote copiously in his relatively short life. His achievement as a pioneer in scientific romance and in detective fiction with a female sleuth is still neglected, especially in Canada.

In the new millennium Wesleyan University Press initiated a series of annotated "Early Classics of SF." I proposed an edition of *Caesar's Column* by Ignatius Donnelly. This novel, a bestseller in its day, was published in 1890, a year I knew a lot about. And Donnelly's sphere of operations centered on St. Paul, Minnesota, one of the few US cities directly connected to Regina by air. So archival research at the Minnesota History Center there was relatively accessible for me. Donnelly, a maverick congressman and fringe theorist, is a fascinating figure. His writings are still a major key to understanding the connection between populism, racism, and conspiracy theories in US culture. Some of his crazy ideas, developed at book length,

include: how the Aryan race derived from an Atlantean civilization; how a comet impact destroyed Atlantis; and how Francis Bacon, the real author of Shakespeare's plays, left elaborate codes in those plays to establish his identity.

My university continued to support me as generously as it could. From 2002-04 I was appointed President's Scholar and given a $10,000 research award plus three course releases. I used the money and the time freed from teaching to complete two projects. The first was a book about how prehistoric fiction derived from nineteenth-century evolutionary theory, especially writings by Darwin and his bulldog, Thomas Henry Huxley. The second was a Broadview edition of that classic of canine lit., *The Call of the Wild*. Jack London's novella is set, not in Alaska as many assume, but in the Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush. Mine was the first scholarly edition from a Canadian perspective.

Flashback to 1985. In November that year I, the most junior member of the U of R English Department, was tasked with coordinating the four-day visit of William Golding to campus. Golding, who'd won the Nobel Prize two years earlier, was on a cross-Canada tour. 74 years old, a recovering alcoholic with serious social anxiety, Golding looked like one of Santa's elves. The visit went well enough, but one morning, after I'd picked Golding up outside the Hotel Saskatchewan, he blearily asked me what "Blue Bombers" were. It turned out that the Winnipeg Canadian Football League team of that name staying on the same hotel floor had kept him up all night raucously celebrating their win over the hometown Saskatchewan Roughriders.

I'd prepared for Golding's visit by reading his oeuvre. *The Inheritors*, his second novel, shook me to the core. It's about a deadly encounter between "our ancestors," i.e., cunning, devious modern humans, and childlike, innocent Neanderthals. It's told from the Neanderthal point of

view, offering the sorts of insight into human nature that sf writers get from alien contact scenarios. (Golding was an avid reader of sf.) There is no other work of prehistoric fiction – pf, I called it – quite as powerful, but there are plenty of good ones, some of them untranslated, others unjustly forgotten. A Canadian example is Charles G.D. Roberts's *In the Morning of Time* (1922). Having established that there was an international tradition of pf dating back to the later nineteenth century, I sent my proposal to Wesleyan University Press, who had moved into the criticism of fantastic literature.

If you want to understand a cultural phenomenon, archival research will only get you so far. You need to check it out on the ground. Using my research award I travelled to the Dordogne region of France to visit the painted caves and get as close as possible to "our" stone age ancestors. I saw the original parietal artwork at Rouffignac and Font de Gaume, the animal paintings at the brilliant facsimile Lascaux II, the rock shelters at St-Christophe occupied first by Neanderthals and later by the Cro-Magnons who replaced them. This trip brought early humans back to life for me in a way no other experience could have done.

As for *The Call of the Wild*, I contracted with Broadview to do a new edition, in which I'd focus on the transition from Buck's comfortable home in what is now Silicon Valley to the rigours of Dawson City, Yukon. I followed Buck's trail as closely as I could, checking out his domicile in Santa Clara, taking a ferry up the coast to Skagway, Alaska, then driving down the Yukon River to Dawson City. In this way I grounded my edition of *The Call of the Wild* in lived experience, as I'd done in researching my book on pf. My edition of *The Call of the Wild* and my book on pf, *The Fire in the Stone: From Charles Darwin to Jean M. Auel*, both appeared in 2009.

Flashback to 1974. Shortly after arriving in Hamilton, I went to a talk about the future of Canadian literature by a writer who, I was told, embodied that future. About fifty people had gathered in a lounge at McMaster Medical Centre. They'd come to hear a slender woman with a dark curly mane and a droning nasal voice. With a total grasp of the facts underlying her argument, she wiped the floor with various male blowhards in the audience. These had come to put her in her place because she was already notorious as a woman with strong ideas. She was Margaret Atwood, of course. *The Handmaid's Tale* is one of the greatest futuristic dystopias in world literature. Given the centrality of sexual politics to all human endeavour, it may well outlast *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the rest. (Needless to say, Atwood had read sf avidly since she was a young girl.)

Around 2004 I wrote the chapter on *The Handmaid's Tale* for a critical anthology on the winners of the Arthur C. Clarke Award. In 1987, Atwood's novel had been the first winner of this, the UK's premier sf award. I tried to explain why Atwood refused to call herself a sf writer, and why her novel had been overlooked by the Booker and other mainstream juries. This is what I said: "Canadians, with a modicum of bitterness, accept that the world considers sf as American as pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving. So a self-consciously Canadian literary novelist who writes fantastic fiction set in the near future is almost obliged not to call it sf." Though that's what it is, of course. As for the Booker snub, I noted that by 2004 there had been twelve books, 150 essays and 57 dissertations exclusively devoted to *The Handmaid's Tale.* The equivalent figures for Kingsley Amis's *The Old Devils*, the Booker winner in 1986, were 0, 6, and 0.

My last big project before retirement was a book called *Science Fiction Adapted to Film* (2016). There's a Canadian angle to this. I've admired Linda Hutcheon since she was a dynamic

sessional instructor at McMaster when I was a grad student there. Her *Theory of Adaptation* (2006) was my starting point; it had plenty of ideas about adaptation, but little to say about sf. I examined more than 300 movies and TV shows, fortunate in that YouTube then had lots of obscure films available to download for free, regardless of rights. I'm simply an enthusiastic amateur when it comes to film, but enthusiasm can carry you a long way.

I started with a chapter on what sf writers had said about film and sf filmmakers had said about the literature. I then summarized my own "theory" of adapting sf literature to film, which involved "remediation," i.e., making the changes necessary to effectively transform a textual into an audiovisual medium. Films based on sf novels are almost always shifted generically into the horror category. Sf literature deals in ideas that are appealing to nerds and their ilk; film, so much more expensive to produce, to recoup its costs must traffic in emotions that have wide popular appeal. I then produced a chronological survey of sf novel-to-film adaptation, starting with *Frankenstein*. There are over 200 films with *Frankenstein* in their titles, though only a tiny fraction owe anything to Mary Shelley's novel. I explained why Philip K. Dick was currently the most frequently adapted sf writer. And I offered ten films as examples of successful adaptive relationships. One was Volker Schlöndorff's *The Handmaid's Tale*, though if I was writing now I'd probably replace this with Bruce Miller's TV series.

The British publisher Gylphi Ltd. was keen to sign me to a contract for my sf adaptation book. Eagerness on the part of publishers is always appealing, though I should probably have been more suspicious. Gylphi did a fine job with the book, a modestly priced paperback which looks sharp. However, aside from one Facebook posting on the day it was published, they made no attempt to promote it. They wouldn't even subscribe to the agency from whose list academic

libraries do their ordering, so it's in no more than a handful of libraries worldwide. I have never received from Gylphi so much as a single statement of sales, let alone a penny in royalties. But after the book came out I was too preoccupied with retiring and moving east to get into a fight with a publisher. And now it's all water under the bridge.

My last few years in academia were disillusioning in other ways. As I've said, I'd enjoyed excellent support from the U of R in my earlier career. But in 2011 it was my turn to be head of the English Department, and I found myself in a fierce battle with my university president who had vowed to abolish English within five years. She saw no value in the study of literature. She never did manage to get rid of English in Regina, though. Before she could carry out her threat, she was headhunted by a larger university out east. Recently she was exposed as a Pretendian and sacked. Draw your own conclusions.

I was not unhappy to take early retirement in 2016. But it was far too expensive for us to move from real-estate bargain-basement Regina to overpriced Toronto, where our kids and grandkids live. So Britt and I moved back to Dundas, the small town at the western tip of Lake Ontario where we were married in 1979. It's close enough to Toronto to visit for the day, far enough from the megalopolis to allow for a quiet life. We've never regretted it.

I've made some blunders in my career, but who hasn't? I doubt if I'd do anything very differently if I had my time over. I always wrote as lucidly as possible in the hope of being understood. That was enough to get me published, in spite of my lack of sympathy with "theory." My main research projects were always undertaken for love of the subject. As a sf specialist, I had very few Canadian colleagues in my early career, and though I never pulled in

any federal or provincial grants, my university was generously supportive when it mattered. However, in spite of the Regina “sf tradition,” I was not replaced by a sf specialist when I retired.

As a retiree, I don’t miss most aspects of academia. Teaching and research in the humanities get no respect from bloated university administrations focused on upping enrolment from triple-tuition-fee-paying foreign students. Whereas once there was a snobbish academic prejudice against sf, now all the humanities are accused of being “out of touch with contemporary values” and their programs are slashed. One suspects that promoters of these so-called values take little account of what’s really important in life. Whatever the case, I do miss students and their love of sf, but not so much that I yearn to return to the classroom. These days I read as widely and delightedly as I did as a child, and I appear in community theatre whenever there’s a part for a elderly curmudgeon. As for writing, I produce photoblogs of places of geographical and historical interest in southern Ontario.

Notwithstanding all this, it’s taken me far too long to express my appreciation, to science fiction and to Canada, for having been so good to me. So, better late than never: I’m truly grateful to you both.