

# Science Fiction/Fantasy Book Group Encourages Reading and Provides a Social Hub

by Catherine Bond and Neil Hollands

**O**n the evening of the third Tuesday of the month, members of the Williamsburg Area Science Fiction/Fantasy Book Group begin to gather at the James City County Library of the Williamsburg Regional Library. They take their time settling in. While exchanging greetings, members discuss the latest films, trade books or presents, give writing advice, debate politics and philosophy, start impromptu punning contests, or show off craft projects or collectibles. Tonight, the height of attention is on, of all things, a spray can of pancake batter, a novelty that prompts a few questions and even more jokes. New faces are greeted, and those who have been away are welcomed back.

The group started in 2005, when a few survivors of a defunct chain-store book group contacted the Williamsburg Regional Library. Led by Bob Snare, they were looking primarily to advertise a new group and possibly to find a place to meet. Instead they found a sympathetic librarian who liked fantasy and science fiction and was looking to add a book group to the library's outreach efforts and his own list of job functions. Using advertising at the library, contacts from the former group, and connections in local fandom, an opening meeting was cobbled together.

Three years later, the group is going strong. Most genre reading

groups are small, often short-lived affairs, with just a few dedicated readers, but the Williamsburg group draws around twenty members each month from locations as far away as Richmond and

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Hampton. Most book groups are homogenous, with members from a common demographic of age, gender, and experience. At this group, ages run from college students to retirees; and while there are more men, the gender mix is nearly even. Members come from all walks of life: scientists, educators, and librarians mix with book sellers, technology experts, an ex-cop, and a smattering of part-time workers. Political beliefs run the gamut.

Even approaches to reading vary. Some members are hard-core bibliophiles. Some are dedicated to either fantasy or science fiction but dislike the other genre. Some prefer short stories, or graphic novels, or works published before 1980. A few members quietly prefer other genres. But most exciting of all, group participation has got some

members to read **BOOKS** again. Prior to joining, their reading habit had dwindled to magazines, newspapers, or nothing at all, but now they make time to get through novels. They might not enjoy all of the books they encounter at the group, but find many titles they like or even love. They are introduced to authors they might not choose otherwise and find reasons to read books they always intended, but never found time, to read.

How does a big, shambling, digressive hodgepodge of a group survive? An important ingredient is the format. Instead of reading one common book, as most groups

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do, this group selects a monthly theme. Themes have included such far-flung topics as space opera, epic fantasy, vampires, apocalyptic novels, coming-of-age stories, romance crossovers, speculative fiction marketed as mainstream fiction, animals, and music. A librarian-created list of suggestions is distributed at the prior month's meeting and also available online through Yahoo Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/wmsbrgsfbooks/>). Members have to join the Yahoo Group to get the list online, but it's free, and after that, any announcements, booklists, or other communications are sent directly via email. The backlog of past thematic lists is also available through the Yahoo site.

Members can select any book they feel embodies the theme. After an introduction to the topic—sometimes prepared, sometimes improvised—discussion proceeds around the table, with each attendee introducing the book they've read in about five minutes. This themed format requires patience. Digressions are frequent, because the tour through many different titles provides many inspirations for conversation, but the group has learned to enjoy them as much as the book talk. Members have very different tastes and don't appreciate every book others discuss, but ultimately the variety is beneficial: it would be boring if everyone liked the same things. A diverse group like this would never agree on a common book, and most members would quit if disappointed too often in the selection. Some would be embarrassed to attend if they hadn't finished an assigned book. Others would dislike the confrontation that disagreement about a single title creates. By using broad themes, none of the members' favorite genres or formats, style preferences, or political beliefs need be neglected. Some members report on books they

remember from the past; some read outside the monthly theme; and some simply listen to what the others have to say until next month. Because of the diversity in reading each month, the library or local bookstores don't have to strain to find enough copies of a single title.

Members discover other books appropriate to their tastes over the course of a meeting and often go home with a new list of authors or titles to try. They learn about the history of science fiction and fantasy and about the styles of individual authors (and contribute

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their own knowledge to the discussion). One member reports that her friends in more conventional groups are curious about and even envious of the thematic approach.

The group also thrives on its commitment to openness and respect for others. Although it is an untrue cliché in some cases, many science fiction and fantasy readers will be quick to admit that they have awkward social skills. For most, however, the tradeoff is a sense of humor about themselves and appreciation of diversity and quirkiness in others. Members, particularly newcomers, have different levels of skill at presenting their books. Some need to be reminded not to give away too much with spoilers. Some need to be gently cut off when they go on too long, while others need to be drawn out with additional questions. Other groups could learn from the tact and gentleness with which needed

suggestions are provided. Given patience and good examples, even the most awkward personalities and presentation techniques often improve dramatically within a few months. And while the two-hour time limit is continually tested, the group has never failed yet to make it around the table.

Members come to feel part of a group of lively, friendly people. They like to go someplace where people are happy to see them and to keep up with friends (some of whom they met though the group) when day-to-day schedules don't permit other social interaction. The group includes several couples who like that they have found a shared activity. Birthday celebrations are fit into the meetings, as is news about members' triumphs and tribulations in life. In December, we skip the book talk and spend the month enjoying a potluck dinner and playing thematic games.

Creativity flourishes in the group setting. Bud Webster, who makes a monthly trek from Richmond for the meeting, is the poetry editor for *Helix: A Speculative Fiction Quarterly* (<http://www.helixsf.com>) and has published his own stories and poems widely. He's a font of information about book collecting, selling, and publishing in the speculative fiction world, and shares what he knows regularly with budding writers in the group. Neil Hollands, the group's liaison with WRL, was inspired by what he learned each month to publish his first readers' advisory title, *Read On ... Fantasy Fiction: Reading Lists for Every Taste* with Libraries Unlimited in 2007. He's working on a second title, a handbook for speculative fiction book groups. Jim Michie, another writer in the group, publishes a wide variety of stories, essays, and reviews online (<http://jimmichie.com/>).

Creativity in the group goes well beyond the written word. It's not unusual for craft projects such as

beading, knitting, costuming, doll-making, and other needlework to appear at the meetings. Some of these works are sold professionally at Renaissance fairs and conventions, while others have been exhibited in local and national galleries and shows. Techniques are shared and discussed. The group also has graphic designers, historical reenactors, visual artists, and technical writers among its numbers, who share tips about their crafts, notices of upcoming events, and career advice.

The success of the group has expanded beyond monthly meetings. After each meeting, the group dines at a local Mexican restaurant, a perk that draws members in months when they don't finish a book and includes spouses and friends who aren't interested in speculative fiction. The group has become a social hub for its members, who meet weekly for coffee and small talk at a local bookstore or sample local restaurants together. Members often become part of a larger social group that joins together for parties and provides a good portion of the staff for a thriving local convention, MarsCon.

The group is an extended family, with its own dysfunctions and shared successes. Its membership is a microcosm of the larger community. Members get help with all kinds of tasks: finding a plumber, printing business cards, moving

to a new apartment, finding a ride to the airport, or getting help in a time of illness. Book reviews, movie reviews, or restaurant recommendations are all shared with enthusiasm.

The benefits for Williamsburg Regional Library are considerable. The lists of books that fit each monthly theme don't take much time to create and are reused for the library's other readers. Knowledge gained while creating the lists and listening to group members is used to inform collection development, helping WRL's speculative fiction collection to become exceptional. Group members create a solid base audience for this collection. Members of the group have become library volunteers, donating time to tasks such as shelving, shelf-reading, and presenting programs. They regularly donate books and purchase items from the Friends of the Library.

Contacts from the group led to a solid line of "Sci-Fi July" programming one year, including programs on model-making for film and television; a program on graphic novels; a science show featuring tricks with liquid nitrogen; and a program on Mars: half on its portrayal in fiction and film, and half with a NASA expert who had pictures of his latest work on the roving Mars landers.

Thematic book groups that focus on a particular genre, subject, or format are a winning outreach and

programming choice. Other libraries could easily repeat the success of the Williamsburg Science Fiction and Fantasy Group. These groups are easy to manage and provide rewards far beyond the effort it takes to maintain them—rewards felt by participants and the library at large. Find your own communities of interest and consider starting one of these groups soon! 

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