

### The Science Fiction Foundation at Fifty



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On 26 June, at our joint AGM with the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA), the SFF celebrated its 50th anniversary with two events: a panel chaired by Maureen Speller, with Roz Kaveney, Farah Mendlesohn, Andy Sawyer and Graham Sleight, and a conversation between myself and John Clute (the latter is available [here](#)). Much genial and insightful talk ensued, and yet—what exactly *is* the Science Fiction Foundation?

As Clute acknowledges, for much of its life, certainly up until the move of the SFF Collection to the University of Liverpool in the early 1990s, the SFF existed as a nebulous entity without legal status. We are now a registered charity and are reliant, for all our activities, upon the support of our members and the generosity of private donors. Our aims remain the same as stated in the first issue of *Foundation* in 1972: to provide research facilities for anyone wishing to study science fiction; to investigate and promote the usefulness of science fiction in education; to disseminate information about science fiction; and to promote a discriminating understanding of the nature of science fiction. Sounds clear enough, and yet...

Long before para-academia was even a thing, the SFF was a para-academic research center-*cum*-network. The story of its survival, and even more than that, its growth, is not only a victory against the odds but also a tale of how independent research, carried out by full-time academics, postgraduate students, non-affiliated scholars and out-and-out fans, can flourish within the margins of academia.

The origins of the SFF are unclear, even to those who were around at the time. Its prime instigator was George Hay, SF writer and editor, environmental campaigner and self-styled 'futures consultant', a man who, as a teenager, had feasted upon the works of John W. Campbell, and believed that SF offered a blueprint for not only how the world might be but how it *should be*. As reported to Andrew Darlington, Hay created his 'think-tank', the Science Fiction Foundation, in October 1970 with a view to re-educating the planet with the values of SF. I say 'created' but actually it was more like a feat of magical thinking. At this stage, the SFF was no more than a speech-act ventriloquized by Hay in performance with a few, notable friends: James Blish, John Brunner and Ken Bulmer.

The formal establishment of the SFF occurred in early 1971. According to Charles Barren, the first editor of *Foundation*, Hay persuaded George Brosan, an SF fan and the first director of the North East London Polytechnic (NELP), to establish the SFF as 'a semi-autonomous unit' within the Faculty of Arts. A public meeting was held, where Brosan stood aside, and Barren became the first Chair of the SFF. And here the first fault-line appeared. Whereas Hay was driven by a desire

to save the world from itself via SF, Barren had the rather more limited desire of establishing SF as serious literature for writers and critics alike. The flagship of the SFF would be the journal, *Foundation*, and its engine, the SFF Library, initially created by donations from the BSFA. Much myth-making ensued. Hay painted a picture of *Foundation* as being edited and largely written by himself, a *samizdat* publication knocked-out on the polytechnic's photocopiers. Barren recalls that *Foundation* was actually published by a small science press, and that it was he, not Hay, who conceived it as a mixture of academic and literary journal. The snag, as Barren later conceded, was that hopes of selling up to 5000 copies via high-street retailers were drastically misplaced. Furthermore, like other areas of academic publishing, contributors were not paid. Nonetheless, *Foundation* did manage to attract a Nebula-nominated short story from James M. Tiptree and a poem by Marilyn Hacker. When the SFF Administrator, Peter Nicholls, assumed editorship of the journal in 1974, in what amounted to a coup, both the fiction and the poetry were dropped (with occasional exceptions, most notably, the all-fiction *Foundation* 100).

From the contrasting perspectives of Barren and Hay, Nicholls's ascendancy marked the growing academic dominance of the SFF. This is not how Nicholls saw it. The SFF had been formally launched in May 1971; Nicholls joined as Administrator in October, on loan from NELP, where he had been employed as a lecturer. Although physically situated in the polytechnic, the SFF was not fully part of it: its Management Committee was divided between NELP staff and Hay's more revolutionary faction. (The SFF's original patron was Arthur C. Clarke, later to be joined by Ursula Le Guin. Its current patrons are Neil Gaiman, Nalo Hopkinson and Prof David Southwood.) The idea of the SFF appealed to NELP because of its interdisciplinarity: it chimed with values which, in the early 1970s, distinguished the polytechnics from the older universities. However, although SF was taught as part of the University of London's Extra-Mural Studies, it did not become part of the official undergraduate provision at NELP. With few UK scholars working in SF, Nicholls became the genre's academic face: much of his time as Administrator and journal editor was spent writing for newspapers, appearing on TV, and organizing events at the National Film Theatre and the I.C.A. He was supported by professional writers such as Christopher Priest and Ian Watson: although, in 1975, Nicholls wrote a jeremiad attacking the New Wave, he was necessarily reliant upon writers and critics associated with New Worlds. In 1977, as his own position at NELP became economically precarious and *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* was contracted for publication, Nicholls left both UK academia and the SFF. He later declared that *Foundation* is 'not an academic journal, for there is no academic infrastructure to support it'. If SF is often regarded as para-literature, then presumably, *Foundation* is para-literary criticism, somewhere between a prozine and an academic title. (Later editors may have revised that opinion.)

Malcolm Edwards, Nicholls's successor as Administrator, stepped-up to become journal editor but left in 1980. His successor was David Pringle, but now there was no paid Administrator: Barren, Ian MacPherson, Ted Chapman and, most importantly, John Radford all took on unpaid duties. The only paid member of the SFF, and that part-time, was Joyce Day, who fronted the

SFF Collection now held at NELP's Barking campus—the largest, publicly available SF library in the UK with some 20,000 titles. There was, therefore, a massive discrepancy between the size of the SFF's assets and its dwindling infrastructure. Yet, despite this, the platform that Nicholls had established with the journal was successively built upon by Edwards, Pringle and, from 1986, Edward James. The SFF therefore became identified with *Foundation* and the Collection—membership of the SFF, though, has always been more than just subscription to the journal.

An appointed Council lent the SFF the appearance of an infrastructure, but in the late 1980s, the Friends of Foundation was formed to protect it. In 1991, when NELP became the University of East London, it removed its remaining support from the journal and the Collection. The following year, the Council took up the University of Liverpool's offer to re-house the Collection and, in 1993, Andy Sawyer was appointed as both Librarian and Administrator. On 26 January 1995, a charter was signed between the University and John Clute, representing the Friends of Foundation, ensuring the safekeeping of the Collection at Liverpool. Three years later, the Friends were dissolved and reformed as the Science Fiction Foundation, a registered charity with a Committee and Trustees. Only in 1998, therefore, did the SFF become a legal entity, some 27 (or maybe 28) years after it was willed into being.

And yet...

Although, since the mid-1990s, there has been a veritable renaissance with conferences, academic tracks, book publications (in addition to the journal), the annual George Hay Lecture, the SFF Masterclass, Science for Fiction, and a doubling in size of the Collection, the SFF remains something of a phantom. It has no office, no building, and it would be going too far to claim the Sydney Jones Library, which houses the Collection, as its own. The Committee meets twice a year, in addition to the AGM, but currently dispersed and online, from the comfort of their own homes. In other words, legal entity though it now is, the SFF retains its alluring, mysterious, para-academical status. It may be the closest thing to Bohemia that an academic can get.

At the same time, there has been a fluorescence in the UK of younger academic networks, propelled by tech-savvy and socially aware postgraduates. These include Current Research for Speculative Fiction (CRSF) based at the University of Liverpool, the Fantastika conferences and online journal initially founded at Lancaster University, and the London Science Fiction Research Community based in or around Birkbeck College, London. Sometimes these networks, most notably CRSF, overlap with the SFF but mostly they have emerged alongside it. In addition, there are now research centers and research clusters at Anglia Ruskin, Brunel, Glasgow and Liverpool. Although these developments bear witness to the SFF as a pathfinder, it can also become overlooked. It's hard to contemplate a time when the SFF might disappear: its material assets, most notably the Collection, are vast, and Liverpool continues to commit itself via the outreach and MA degree now led by Phoenix Alexander and Will Slocombe. Yet, at some point, the SFF will have to merge with these networks since these younger academics constitute the future of SF studies in the UK.

The other transformative factor is that of digitality. As the events of 2020/21 have shown, we can now pursue several of our educational activities online. For example, this year's Hay Lecture, given by the forensic archaeologist Kirsty Squires, was presented virtually while the next SFF Masterclass is earmarked for online delivery. We are gradually constructing an online archive for the journal, and at some point, we may have to consider whether *Foundation* will continue as a print and/or e-journal. (Past and present issues are already available electronically via EBSCO and ProQuest.) I certainly hope that when we next consider holding a conference, we will do so digitally—the SFF has already sponsored online events such as last October's *Riddley Walker Day*. How we interact with our members will also change through the prism of digitality: the journal's Facebook group currently has 847 members and, as I often remark, if each of those followers became actual members of the SFF, our fortunes would be dramatically enriched.

Which brings me to my final note. As Farah Mendlesohn observed at the anniversary panel, the UK's university sector is going through severe changes with wide-scale job losses and departmental closures. The bankruptcy and merger of whole universities is on the immediate horizon. Due to its para-academic status, the SFF is not only placed to weather these storms but it can also provide shelter. Annual membership remains low, from £15 for a student to £25 for a salaried individual to £50 for a university. In the coming years, there are likely to be more independent scholars as universities contract. *Foundation* has repeatedly shunned the likes of Elsevier to remain as open and as accessible to as many scholars as possible. I hope that you will consider joining the SFF for the greater good of the academic community, whether affiliated to an institution or not.

## Further Reading

Barren, Charles. 1990. 'Guest Editorial: Foundation in Retrospect'. *Foundation* 50: 4-9.

Darlington, Andrew. 2012. 'SF Interview: George Hay – By Space Possessed'. *Eight Miles Higher*, 29 October. <http://andrewdarlington.blogspot.com/2012/10/sf-interview-george-hay-by-space.html> (accessed 8 July 2021).

Nicholls, Peter. 1990. 'Foundation Garments, or the Administrator's New Clothes: An Unreliable Memoir'. *Foundation* 50 (1990): 10-27.

Nicholls, Peter, John Clute and Andy Sawyer. 2016. 'Science Fiction Foundation'. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Eds. John Clute and David Langford. [http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/science\\_fiction\\_foundation](http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/science_fiction_foundation) (accessed 8 July 2021).