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A Defanged Doppelgänger

SoFla's sci-fi fans once had a place to call home. Now they're nomadic, dwindling in numbers, and graying.

By Jim Gaines

A few minutes after 2 p.m. on September 22, eight figures filed through the staff area of the Imperial Point public library. Librarians glanced up at the parade as it wound back to a meeting room half-filled with plastic chairs. Four of the eight wore T-shirt mementos from science-fiction conventions past. Most were in their thirties or forties; some were older, none younger -- their demographic was given away by spreading waistlines and thickening glasses. As they sat the room filled with a chorus of inside jokes and risqué one-liners of the type usually heard among long-time friends. Several piled paperback novels on tables in front of them. On one stack perched a cuddly green plush Cthulhu, a defanged doppelgänger of the titanic avatar of interstellar evil from H.P. Lovecraft's classic horror stories.



Mark Poutenis

Seven more people had wandered in by 2:25, when George Peterson, the sandy-haired, boyish-looking vice chairman of the South Florida Science Fiction Society, stood up. "Well, I guess we'll get started," he said. It was almost time to elect officers for 2002, and nobody had been nominated. He asked for suggestions. The room remained silent. Finally Peterson, a 39-year-old computer technician, shrugged and continued.

The group, which bears the sibilant name Sisyphus (for SFSFS), is the spawn of a century-old tradition of forward-lookers who have eagerly awaited and predicted the marvels of the third millennium A.D. Science fiction fans prepared for the wonders of 2001 with Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick. Their works described the future, but the future is now, and the ranks of yesterday's prophets grow ever thinner. After realizing they can no longer afford to rent their clubhouse, the dwindling numbers of SoFla sci-fi adherents have become nomads.

The tales of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells laid the groundwork for science fiction in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the 1930s the first literary fanzines, such as *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Science Fiction*, were published. Clubs of readers formed to discuss favorite stories and work on writing their own tales.

Soon there were enough fans to put together a more formal gathering; thus in New York in 1939, the World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) was born. Since then sci-fi conventions have sprung up across the country; most major cities have hosted at least one, and it was a pseudo-convention that brought together South Florida's sci-fi fans 20 years ago to form the progenitor of Sisyphus.

In 1980 Florida Atlantic University began sponsoring an annual academic gathering called the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. Researchers presented academic papers on the cultural effects of science fiction and fantasy, and leading writers were invited to speak. But the authors didn't have a lot to do when they weren't conferring.

Enter Joc Siclari. Then 33 years old and a sci-fi fan since the 1960s, he and a few others organized a supplementary convention, dubbed [Tropicon](#), to follow and complement the 1982 FAU gathering. There authors met their fans, chatted with one another, and relaxed. "We pitched in a bit of money and put on a show, I guess you could say," Siclari chuckles. He ran panel discussions, held a fantasy-art show, and let book-and-trinket dealers set up tables -- all standard sci-fi convention fare.

In the ensuing years, Tropicon took off, attracting major names in the field such as Marion Zimmer Bradley, Jack C. Haldeman II, Mike Resnick, Ben Bova, and Hal Clement. "Some come back year after year from a thousand, two thousand miles away," Siclari says.

As Tropicon grew, its sponsors coalesced into a regular group. Many of them had been active science-fiction fans in other parts of the country before moving to South Florida, Siclari says. He served as chairman of Magicon '86, which was held in Orlando. Sci-fi fandom bestowed the coveted title of Worldcon upon that year's Magicon, which attracted enthusiasts from around the globe. Among them were eight people from South Florida who met at Siclari's house soon after the Orlando gathering to form the Coral Springs Science Fiction League, Social Drinking Society, and Traveling Fan Variety Show. About half of them worked for IBM in Boca Raton, including Edie Stern, who would later become Siclari's wife. They held a monthly party that attracted local artists and writers and soon became a literary discussion group, authors' workshop, and seminar on advancing science.

In 1985 the group adopted a more serious name: Sisyphus. Worldcon was again combined with Orlando's Magicon in 1992, and most of Sisyphus' current officers met then and joined the group soon afterward. Membership peaked at 115.

As Sisyphus looked forward to the new millennium, the world of science fiction and fantasy fandom was changing. Role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* drew thousands of fans. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Babylon 5*, *The X-Files*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* attracted TV audiences millions strong. None of these shows was neglected by Sisyphus members, but the group focused on educational and literary activities, says Siclari, who's now a high-school history teacher. "Maybe that's one of the reasons the club has remained small," he adds.

The new branches of science fiction have created their own exclusive groups of devotees, which haven't always mixed well with Sisyphus members. "We're

competing against a lot of other things that people can do in their spare time," says 35-year-old Shirlene Ananayo-Rawlik, who works for a law firm. She's been a club member since 1993 and is chairwoman of this year's Tropiccon. "It's the graying of fandom, as it were," says the cheerful and dark-haired woman. Her boisterous and mustachioed husband, Pete Rawlik (they met at one Tropiccon, and he proposed at another), agrees. "If you're a *Buffy* fan, you can find an online community of *Buffy* fans, and you don't have to talk to anyone else."

They're echoed by club secretary Melanie Herz, a Brevard County resident who joined Sisyphus during its infancy in 1986. "It was not designed to be originally, in my opinion, a media club," Herz says. "You're finding less and less people reading and more and more people watching TV and movies."

Authors like J.K. Rowling, Anne Rice, Tom Clancy, and Michael Crichton, who have attracted huge audiences, might once have served as a focus for the sci-fi and fantasy communities. Instead they have inspired discrete fan groups, says 34-year-old Rawlik, a scientist for the South Florida Water Management District.

The best thing about Sisyphus is that it has brought together people with varied interests, says the group's treasurer, Bill Wilson. Wilson, age 42, has been a member since 1985. Most of his social life revolves around Sisyphus friends, whom he's seen come and go. "We've had a lot of trouble in the last couple of years with a lot of our old stalwarts moving away," he says. The biggest blow came in 2000, when Siclari and Stern moved to Yorktown Heights, New York. Now membership is down to about 70, and it's rare for 30 people to appear at meetings. Members more than 60 years old are particularly unlikely to show up, Peterson says.

A serious blow was struck in June of this year, when Sisyphus members had to give up their home away from home. The group's Website at www.sfsfs.org still proudly advertises that, since 1997, Sisyphus has been one of only four science-fiction groups in the country to have its own clubhouse. Its first home was one room on Oakland Park Boulevard, but in 1999 it moved a few blocks to three rented rooms with a bathroom and kitchen. As membership fell, however, raising the \$400-per-month rent became impossible. In late June members carted away to storage the gaming tables, posters, couches, and their 6000-volume library of fanzines and books. Now the club meets irregularly at members' houses or reserves space at public libraries in Broward, Palm Beach, and Miami-Dade counties. A frequent venue is Imperial Point, where original member Becky Peters, age 53, is a librarian.

A long, dry spell awaits Sisyphus members after November 9 to 11, when the 20th Tropiccon is scheduled to be held at the Ambassador Resort in Hollywood. Ananayo-Rawlik expects about 250 to 300 fans to attend this year, down from a mid-'90s peak of about 350. Only about 45 people have registered so far, and only 18 rooms have been reserved.

That's not too alarming, Peterson says, since many people usually register at the last minute or pay at the door. Moreover, this year they got a later-than-usual start on advertising. When it's over, Sisyphus will put Tropiccon on hold until 2003. Some of the crew have been volunteering to help with the convention for almost 20 years, and they're getting tired. They'll spend the next year discussing possible changes. "We need to make some decisions about how we're going to

work it," Peterson says. But science fiction and its fans are always forward-looking and by nature essentially optimistic. "We're definitely planning on doing Tropicons again," he adds.

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