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Science Fiction: The Literature of Ideas. A Report of the LITA Imagineering Interest Group Program. American Library Association Annual Conference, New Orleans, June 2006.

Cassie Wagner

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, cwagner@lib.siu.edu

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SCIENCE FICTION: THE LITERATURE OF IDEAS. A REPORT OF THE LITA
IMAGINEERING INTEREST GROUP PROGRAM. AMERICAN LIBRARY
ASSOCIATION ANNUAL CONFERENCE, NEW ORLEANS, JUNE 2006.

Each year, the LITA Imagineering Interest Group, in cooperation with publishers like Tor Books, hosts a panel discussion with eminent science fiction and/or fantasy authors. These writers talk about the ways their work relates to issues of the day, especially those related to libraries. This year's panel consisted of Vernor Vinge, Jane Lindskold, and David Weber.

Vinge opened the discussion. He is the author of two Hugo award-winning novels, *A Fire Upon the Deep* and *A Deepness in the Sky*. Also well known is his essay "The Coming Technological Singularity," in which he discusses that the accelerating pace of technological development will eventually outstrip present-day humanity's ability to understand it. Beginning a thread that was picked up by the other panelists, Vinge discussed science fiction as a method for stimulating discussion. Specifically, he addressed the use of fiction as polemic. Couched in a fictional setting, he argued, a controversial issue can be approached without some of the baggage it may carry in more mundane situations. Approaches from different perspectives are also possible. The suspension of disbelief required of science fiction readers facilitates these alternate approaches.

Science fiction's supposed predictive abilities, Vinge declared, are "bogus." The genre, however, does have some use as a sort of scenario-based planning. This method looks at present trends and extrapolates from them to extreme outcomes. Working backwards from these extremes, planners can determine the steps taken to reach that state. Once the "symptoms" are identified, preparations or countermeasures can be designed encourage or prevent the outcome. This concept was picked up by attendee Clifford Lynch and put forward as a useful way of thinking for libraries during Lynch's presentation at the LITA Top Tech Trends program.

Where Vinge stressed the position of the author as an originator of ideas and his or her influence on readers, Jane Lindskold, author of the popular Firekeeper series, emphasized that interaction between author and reader is a two-way negotiation of meaning. According to Lindskold, a writer cannot know how he or she will influence readers, each of whom brings different perspectives and experiences to the text. "You [the readers] are our collaborators," she said.

Lindskold also discussed science fiction's ability to open readers' minds to controversial or difficult issues. Science fiction can erase boundaries that people set around themselves and around ideas.

David Weber, author of the bestselling Honor Harrington series, concluded the program. Weber echoed Lindskold and Vinge, saying that science fiction, by taking readers out of their ordinary world, can aid them in thinking differently about things. In his own work, he says, there are no pure villains—no black-hatted, completely evil individuals—just people with different goals who come into conflict. This introduces shades of gray into arguments often reduced to black and white in other media. He also pointed out that in his novels, as well is in the real world, "realities shift with time." Things have not always been perceived as they are, nor will they necessarily be perceived the same way in the future.

Weber also affirmed the place of traditional fiction in this world of rapidly changing technology, saying “Storytelling is the original interactive art.” Like Lindsold, he sees fiction as a dialogue between reader and writer. This discussion can have unexpected results for both parties and remains one of the most important aspects of science fiction and all written literature.

Cassie Wagner
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Carbondale, IL