

Kathryn Allan (l) chats with Jenée Wilde, then-CSWS development GFF, at the CSWS 40th Anniversary Celebration in Nov. 2013 / photo by Jack Liu.



“THE OTHER LIVES”— LOCATING DIS/ABILITY IN UTOPIAN FEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION

by Alice Evans, CSWS Dissemination Specialist

CSWS interviewed Kathryn Allan, inaugural winner of the Le Guin Feminist Science Fiction Fellowship, during her CSWS-supported visit to do research at the UO Libraries Special Collections and University Archives. Allan immersed herself in the archives, reading the letters of Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and other feminist science fiction authors, seeking out conversations about disability and utopia, and delighting in her discoveries.

Q: How does it feel to be selected as the first winner of the Le Guin Feminist Science Fiction Fellowship?

KA: It is the best honor I've had in my academic career by far. Having left academia after I finished my degree in 2010, I didn't really think that I'd have the same kind of opportunities to keep going with my research. But if I did, it was going to be out of pocket, which wasn't going to happen for a long time. The fact that the committee chose someone who identifies as an independent scholar was astounding to me.

Q: You're doing research in UO Special Collections and University Archives. What materials are you exploring? How do you know where to look?

KA: I'm going through Ursula K. Le Guin's papers at my beginning. Most start in the late '60s. I'm capping off discussion around '74-'75, because there needs to be a cap somewhere, unless it's with another feminist author like Joanna Russ. I'm interested in Joanna Russ and Sally Miller Gearhart and their correspondences with other writers. And if I have time, Suzette Haden Elgin. That's my main focus right now.

The Le Guin collection is massive, with 250 boxes of information. All the archivists have been extremely helpful and patient. Yesterday, one of them helped me figure out which containers to look at. I started with Le Guin's letters to her agent, Virginia Kidd. I think it was nine boxes, and I made it through about one and a quarter in a day and a half, and that was only from about 1968 to 1973. The amount of material is overwhelming, and it has required self-discipline not to keep reading stuff that is interesting but not necessarily what I am here for.

When I first conceived the project I thought I'd look at manuscript notes. But that's not going to happen. I'm probably going to spend the most

time in Le Guin's archive, because she was a prolific letter writer. She must have been writing up to ten letters a day sometimes. They're not like, "Hey, it's raining." They're philosophical, political conversations that are really engaging. I'm looking at correspondences, mostly, among the writerly community. And fan letters. I want to look at Le Guin's fan letters.

There's no sign in any of the material that says, "Here, this is the research you want." It requires me to skim many letters, be as strict as I can with myself not to go down what one of the archivists called yesterday a rabbit hole, where I'm just fan-girling. It's quite a challenge because it's my first time doing archival research. I was prepared for the non-linear nature, but it's still another thing to actually keep to a focus. I've been writing reflection notes every morning from what I had looked at the previous day. Those help remind me of the most significant things I've discovered, but also help me work out my feelings around the ethical implications of talking about a person's experience. I'm basically trying to download and archive for myself as much information as possible and not worry about synthesizing that information until later, because it's not possible.

Q: The title of your research project is “The Other Lives”—Locating Dis/Ability in Utopian Feminist Science Fiction.” What are the goals of your research? What are some of the challenges?

KA: I'm reading with two different goals, which is part of the challenge with my project. The first overarching goal is to read with disability studies in mind. That means I'm reading for any kind of conversation with the awareness of bodily difference, whether it's cognitive or physical—where there's advocacy and discussion about, “We need to start including people with disabilities.” One challenge with that line of inquiry is that the writers talk about their personal ailments. I don't

necessarily record these, because I don't feel like it's ethically responsible, for example, to write, “Oh, by the way, in 1971, this person was suffering from this ailment.” But I do pick up on conversations where, say, they're talking about Phillip K. Dick and his kind of situation with mental illness. That's something that is interesting because it's reflected in his work.

And the other, secondary aspect that I'm reading for are conversations around utopia. Much of the conversation Le Guin is having with people when she's writing *The Dispossessed* focuses on what a feminist utopia looks like. I found excellent conversational threads with her and Joanna Russ. And this morning I'm going to return to a philosophical conversation that Le Guin is having with Darko Suvin, the great SF theorist.

Q: What inspired you to do research at the intersection of disability and science fiction?

KA: Personal experience was one factor. I became quite ill during the second year of my dissertation. I realized that the project I had then was not speaking to me. I changed supervisors, and I started focusing on science fiction. *Star Trek*, actually, was a big inspiration. I thought, “What's going on here with all these cures and these weird things about who gets to be gendered in what ways just because they are aliens dealing with technology?” I started getting excited. Then my committee began giving me materials dealing with feminist theorization of embodiment and the vulnerable body. I began reading people like Margrit Shildrick and Rosemary Garland Thomson. I thought, “Wow, this is amazing.”

My PhD ended up being on feminist post-cyberpunk. It was definitely a feminist project, and I was reading for the idea of the vulnerable body. I was starting to look at disability studies, and there was nothing really published about reading disability and science fiction, which

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LE GUIN FEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION FELLOWSHIP

The intention of the Le Guin Feminist Science Fiction Fellowship is to encourage research within UO collections in the area of feminist science fiction. The UO Libraries Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) houses the papers of authors Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Kate Wilhelm, Suzette Haden Elgin, Sally Miller Gearhart, Kate Elliot, Molly Gloss, Laurie Marks, and Jessica Salmonson. SCUA is also in the process of acquiring the papers of James Tiptree, Jr. and other key feminist science fiction authors. For more about these collections, visit <http://library.uoregon.edu/node/3524>. This fellowship supports travel for the purpose of research on, and work with, the papers of feminist science fiction authors housed in the Knight Library. These short-term research fellowships are open to undergraduates, master's and doctoral students, postdoctoral scholars, college and university faculty at every rank, and independent scholars working in feminist science fiction. In 2015, \$3,000 will be awarded to conduct research within these collections.

As part of the CSWS 40th Anniversary Celebration in AY 2013-14, and as a way of honoring the role that SCUA played in our founding, CSWS collaborated with the UO Libraries and the Robert D. Clark Honors College to fund this award for a three-year period.

To find out how to apply for this fellowship, visit csws.uoregon.edu and go to our Funding page. Deadline for the Third Annual Fellowship is September 4, 2015.



2015-16 LE GUIN FEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION FELLOWSHIP
Deadline: September 4, 2015

The Le Guin Feminist Science Fiction Research Fellowships support travel for the purpose of conducting research using the papers of feminist science fiction authors housed in the UO Libraries Special Collections and University Archives. For more information on these collections, which include the papers of Ursula K. Le Guin, visit: <http://library.uoregon.edu/node/3524>.

Applications for short-term research fellowships will be accepted from undergraduates, master's and doctoral students, postdoctoral scholars, and college and university faculty at every rank, as well as independent scholars working in feminist science fiction.

Up to \$3,000 in fellowship support will be awarded for use within one year of award notification.

For complete information and application requirements, visit: <http://csws.uoregon.edu/le-guin-feminist-science-fiction-fellowship/>

The Le Guin Feminist Science Fiction Fellowships are sponsored by the Center for the Study of Women in Society, Robert D. Clark Honors College, and UO Libraries Special Collections and University Archives.

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is quite shocking. There was an article maybe here and there, but an absence of that discussion within science fiction studies.

When I finished my conclusion to my dissertation in 2010, I figured, this is a gap that somebody needs to address. That really resonated with me, and I thought, I cannot wait for somebody else to do it. When you're in the academy, there's a lot of pressure on you to do something marketable, or something that's going to get you funding. Because of the marginalization of disability studies and science fiction studies, I knew it would take a long time for those two things to come together. In disability studies, while there is some science fiction or genre text studied, academics are still looking at what would be considered high literature. That propelled me into doing it on my own. I still wanted to be a researcher; I went to graduate school for seven years, and I feel strongly about maintaining that part of my life. That led me to put out a call for papers to do a disability and science fiction collection of essays, which ended up in a project called *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013. That's really the first book-length work that is investigating disability in science fiction.



Fans that I've met were really supportive of me in the early days before I got anything going. I went to a Worldcon [World Science Fiction Convention] in Reno, and told people, "Hey I'm thinking about doing a collection on disability and science fiction." People were telling me, "DO it." I've had a lot of support from the fans, and from actual science fiction writers, and from various academics. I found a community while doing this work.

I knew that my next task, after an essay collection, would be to write a book on my own. And why not? We should set challenges for our-

selves. People are excited about thinking about disability, since they haven't really before in the academic science fiction community.

Q: Why is feminist utopian science fiction important to your current book project?

KA: I came to science fiction kind of late. I literally started reading science fiction when I was changing my project in my second year of my PhD to science fiction. When I was reading the feminist utopias, things like *The Dispossessed* or Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, those were really the first works where I was seeing disability, or disabled characters, being taken up in a way that is not necessarily to cure them, or to erase them. I'm thinking of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* as well; that story starts with a woman losing her arm. The way in which disability was taken up in those books in that period of literature, which is so invested in talking about sexuality, and talking about gender, there was already that idea of a spectrum of ability. In utopian SF there's a growing awareness that all people need to be included, without this idea of being forced into, "This is what is normal." That's part of what impelled me to propose this project.

For the book that I am working on, I plan to do a survey about disability and the idea of temporality and cure, in terms of, "Do we have a future that is utopic because there is no more disability; or do we have a dystopia because it is rampant?" Of course, disability is socially constructed, so it can be anything. Maybe blue eyes in the future will mark you as being other and undesirable. There's something going on in the '70s, and to some extent in the early '80s, with the works of Marge Piercy, where these kind of conversations are coming up. That's what I'm really interested in, seeing if I can find the awareness that the body suffers, and that it differs in multiple ways. A lot of this is ignored in masculine-driven SF, where if a body suffers, it's because that person is evil, or they deserved it from some kind of moral wrong-doing. Or they are kind of a monstrous thing that needs to be cured. There are not a lot of positive depictions. When I'm reading feminist utopian SF from that era it doesn't seem to be quite as much. There is of course genetic engineering, but the possibility of a more productive and positive discussion of

disabled embodiments is coming to the forefront.

Q: How do you think the Le Guin award will make a difference in your research project?

KA: It's going to definitely inform an article, maybe several articles, and it's basically helping support me write the monograph that I have planned, and honestly, it's probably going to help me in ways I haven't conceived of yet. I haven't had time to synthesize it. But I know that being awarded as the inaugural Le Guin Fellowship winner has made me far more popular at conferences. As an independent scholar I don't have a university affiliation. And sometimes in the academic community when people just see an independent scholar, they're like, "uhhh...." There are more conversations that I am able to have with people. I think it's going to open up opportunities in the future and that it's an honor that will last, not just something useful only in 2013-2014, but something that is going to be useful in my life as an academic, or, as a scholar. Kind of a nice feather in my cap, so to speak.

Q: Would it have changed your book quite a bit to have not been able to come?

KA: It would be a different book. Even now there's so much background that I know about the writers. How can you really ignore all this personal experience that I've been reading? It's impossible. It's going to definitely change and inflect the way I write about *The Wanderground*, or the way I write about *The Dispossessed*. The book still would have happened, but it would not be the same book. I wouldn't have had the same opportunity to write different kinds of articles and write on my blog.

I have a bunch of places where I want to disseminate this information. I want to let people know that the fellowship is there; not only to apply for it, but I hope that people will put money into it, to sustain it, because I want to be able to give back. I'm on Twitter as my social media outlet. My followers are about half academics and half people who are involved in the science fiction community, which is its own thing. I've been trying to advocate through there. I've been tweeting this whole time. In the morning and afternoon I send out some tweets, just about the research in general, not about my

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DISCOVERING THE OTHER LIVES

Researching in the Feminist Science Fiction Archives

by Kathryn Allan, PhD, 2013 Le Guin Feminist Science Fiction Fellowship awardee

It is an honor to be the inaugural recipient of the Le Guin Feminist Science Fiction Fellowship. Announced during the Sally Miller Gearhart “Worlds Beyond World” Utopian Feminist Science Fiction symposium last November, the fellowship enabled me to spend ten full days researching the archived collections of Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Suzette Haden Elgin, and Sally Miller Gearhart. My goal was to read with disability studies in mind, with secondary interests in feminist politics and utopian SF. I was privy to the often intimate thoughts of these women, and also to those on the other side of the letters (James Tiptree, Jr., Virginia Kidd, Philip K. Dick, Samuel Delany, and Marge Piercy were particularly engaging correspondents). I feel that I’ve met many of the great luminaries of science fiction through their inspiring, well-crafted letters.

Since I couldn’t possibly read every page carefully, my research strategy was to quickly determine whether the content of the letter was worth closer consideration later on. This practice, of course, was easier said than done! I lingered over handwritten letters in all manner of legibility. I leafed through stacks of paper of every kind: yellow, pink, and blue colored, teeny to large sized, flimsy carbon copies, stationary with bright flowered borders and dragons (apparently quite popular in the 1970s). In the end, I returned home with scans of over 700 letters (around 1,300 pages in total)—this is a lot of information to process, and it will still take me quite some time to read and make sense of what I have collected.

The title of my proposed project, “The Other Lives—Locating Dis/Ability in Utopian Feminist Science Fiction,” was inspired, in part, by this line from Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969): “Will you tell us about the other worlds out among the stars—the other kinds of men, the

other lives?” I think it speaks to the power of story-telling, both within books and within our daily lives. The letters of Le Guin, Russ, Gearhart, and Haden offer a special vantage point into their work. I didn’t know what to expect when I first sat down in the Knight Library’s Special Collections Reading Room. Throughout the four collections I searched, there is a great deal of lively conversation about feminism, the gay and lesbian rights movement, and leftist thought, and I was taken aback by the intimacy of several correspondences. These archived letters tell the story of what it was like to be a woman, and a feminist, writing in a genre dominated by men and sexist politics. After ten days of researching, my head was filled with the dynamic and inspiring lives of these writers.

Due to the depth and complexity of the material collected, the feminist SF archive holds a great deal of interest for scholars from a wide variety of disciplines. Linguists will find a treasure trove in Elgin’s archive: there are files full of her careful documentation of Láadan, the women’s language she created and included in her *Native Tongue* trilogy. Fan studies scholars will be particularly interested in exploring the many hundreds of fan letters (from adults and children alike) in Le Guin’s archive that span her entire writing career. Gearhart’s collection will appeal to anybody studying the gay and lesbian rights movement of the 1970s. Not only does her archive include personal correspondences detailing her motivation behind writing *The Wanderground*, there is a variety of material that documents how rights activists organized in a pre-Internet era. For anyone wanting to better understand the ferocity of the feminist SF classic, *The Female Man*, Russ’s archived letters are a biographer’s dream: full of sharp political commentary, critical literary analysis, intense self-reflection, and motivating lessons in how to be a Feminist.

really like it to be accessible to fans. When I did the collection on disability and science fiction, I tried to keep it accessible to all readers. If I talk about theoretical concepts, I want to make sure that they’re accessible.

One of the things I’ve been doing in preparation for the trip is reading and rereading texts I haven’t read in disability studies for a few years. I revisited Susan Wendell’s *The Rejected Body*, which was published in 1996 originally. I read it when I was doing my dissertation studies—but when I was rereading it, just before I came, I was

SPECIFIC COLLECTIONS CONSULTED

In the collection for Ursula K. Le Guin, I thoroughly consulted the following correspondences (mostly dated between 1968-1985): Virginia Kidd, James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), Darko Suvin, Stanislaw Lem, Philip K. Dick, Joanna Russ, Avram Davidson, as well as a brief selection of other authors (e.g., Vonda McIntyre, Harlan Ellison, Robert Silverberg). In the collection of Joanna Russ, I paid close attention to her correspondences (mostly dating from 1970 to 1980) with: Samuel Delany, Ursula Le Guin, Sally Miller Gearhart, Suzy McKee Charnas, Marge Piercy, as well as quickly read over a few letters from other writers (e.g., Philip K. Dick). For the collections of Sally Miller Gearhart and Suzette Haden Elgin, I read through all of their correspondence files (as there is a limited amount in comparison to the collections of Le Guin and Russ), and also reviewed materials particular to their areas of expertise (e.g., linguistic files for Elgin, and activist newsletters for Gearhart).

Through my fellowship research, I have grown as both a scholar and a feminist. In the lives of these brilliant women—Le Guin, Russ, Gearhart, and Elgin—I found a kinship of passion and persistence. No matter what personal or professional challenges they faced (and there were many), none of them gave up advocating for the betterment of other people’s lives. We can see their dedication through the stories they tell of fantastic and alien worlds where other communities of belonging are possible. I would like to thank the Le Guin Feminist Science Fiction Fellowship and its sponsors (Center for the Study of Women in Society, Robert D. Clark Honors College, and UO Libraries Special Collections and University Archives) for providing me with this amazing research opportunity. ■

—An independent scholar of feminist science fiction, cyberpunk, and disability studies, Kathryn Allan runs *Academic Editing Canada* and is editor of the interdisciplinary collection *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure* (2013). She blogs and tweets as *Bleeding Chrome*.

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direct findings. I’ve been sharing, for example, the working titles for things.

Q: You described your project as a monograph, which I think of more as an academic kind of book. But as you describe it, it sounds like you are working on more of a crossover book.

KA: I say monograph because that’s one way to say a book and make it clear that it’s not a collection. I keep going back and forth about how academic I want to make the voice, because I would

saying, “This is what I need to emulate for my writing voice, if I want people who aren’t trained by the university to read it.” Wendell talks about very difficult concepts of feminist disability theory and embodiment, and it’s so accessible. She’s kind of my road map for language. I definitely want fans, and other people who are interested, to read it. I don’t like inaccessible writing. Theoretical language, I think, can be accessible. ■

—Alice Evans, CSWS research dissemination specialist and CSWS Annual Review editor, interviewed Kathryn Allan in May 2014.